



The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Daniel–Malachi

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Text and Exposition

I. STORIES ABOUT DANIEL (1:1–6:28)

A. Daniel and the Three Friends in Nebuchadnezzar’s Court (1:1–21)

OVERVIEW

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The opening chapter of Daniel introduces the “court stories” section of the book (chs. 1–6). These stories are narrative episodes told in the third person and relate the exploits of Daniel and his three companions during their captivity in Babylon. The content of ch. 1 may be outlined in four units: the first (vv.1–2) provides the setting of the book of Daniel (the royal court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia and his successors; v.1), and the central theological theme of the book (God’s sovereignty, as “the Lord delivered” Jehoiakim to the Babylonians; v.2); the second (vv.3–7) introduces the main

characters, or protagonists, of the narratives—the Hebrew captives Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; the third (vv.8–17) offers clues as to the key elements of the “plot” of the book as a narrative, especially nonconformity to the dominant culture (v.8), the testing of faith in God (v.12), and divine provision (v.17); the final literary unit (vv.18–21) foreshadows the outcome of the court stories of the first half of the book—the success and longevity of the four Hebrew captives as officials in the royal court of Babylon.

1. *Historical Introduction (1:1–2)*

¹In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

COMMENTARY

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1 King Jehoiakim (609–597 BC) was installed as a “puppet king” by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt after the death of King Josiah (cf. 2Ki 23:30, 34). The third year of Jehoiakim’s reign dates Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem and Daniel’s subsequent captivity

to 605 BC. This date accords with the accession-year method characteristic of the Babylonian system for computing regnal years (i.e., reckoning a king’s first full year of kingship to commence on the New Year’s Day after his accession to the throne, or 608

BC for Jehoiakim; cf. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 16–18). Critics point to the chronological discrepancy in the biblical reporting of the date of the event in that Jeremiah synchronizes the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign with the fourth year of King Jehoiakim's reign (Jer 25:1, 9; cf. Porteous, 25–26). Yet if one assumes that Jeremiah is based on a nonaccession-year method of reckoning regnal years (more common to Egyptian and Syro-Palestinian practice), the difficulty fades and the dates are readily harmonized (cf. Longman and Dillard, 376–77).

Beyond this, critics dispute the historical veracity of Daniel's report of a Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 605 BC because there is no record of such an incursion into Palestine at that time (cf. Redditt, 43). There is, however, indirect evidence for a Babylonian campaign in Palestine in 605 BC. Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1:19) cites a Babylonian priest-historian named Berossus, who recorded that Nebuchadnezzar was engaged in campaigns in Egypt, Syria, and Phoenicia at the time his father died (cf. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 15). Further, a cuneiform tablet published in 1956 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar "conquered the whole area of the Hatti-country" shortly after the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC. The geographical term "Hatti" would have included the whole of Syria and Palestine at this time period (cf. Miller, 57; see also Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings* [London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1961], 69).

The siege of Jerusalem in 605 BC, then, was the first of three major invasions of Palestine by Babylonians (although there is no reference to armed conflict in vv.1–2, and the verb "besieged" [Heb. *šwr*] may suggest more threat than substance, as evidenced in Goldingay's [3] translation "blockaded"; cf. Wood, 30, who comments that "likely only token resistance was made, with the Judeans recognizing the wisdom of peaceful capitulation").

The second incursion occurred at the end of Jehoiakim's reign in 598 BC, when King Nebuchadnezzar was finally in a position to move against the disloyal Judean vassal (Jehoiakim had rebelled earlier against Babylonia ca. 603 BC; cf. 2Ki 24:1–7). By the time Nebuchadnezzar reached Jerusalem, Jehoiakim had died and Jehoiachin his son was king of Judah (2Ki 24:8). As a result of this invasion of Judah, King Jehoiachin was deposed and exiled along with ten thousand citizens of Jerusalem (including Ezekiel; 2Ki 24:10–17; cf. Eze 1:1–2).

The third Babylonian invasion of Judah was swift and decisive. Nebuchadnezzar surrounded Jerusalem in 588 BC and after a lengthy siege, the city was sacked, Yahweh's temple was plundered and destroyed, and Davidic kingship in Judah ceased (2Ki 24:18–25:21).

Nebuchadnezzar II was the eldest son of Nabopolassar and is considered one of the greatest kings of ancient times. He ruled the Babylonian Empire from 605–562 BC—an empire that stretched across the ancient Near East from Elam in the east to Egypt in the west. Miller, 56, notes that the writer of Daniel refers proleptically to Nebuchadnezzar as "king of Babylon," since he was actually crowned king some two or three months after the siege of Jerusalem.

The city of Babylon lay on the Euphrates River, some fifty miles south of modern Baghdad in Iraq. It reached the height of its splendor as the capital of the Chaldean or Neo-Babylonian Empire because of the extensive building activities of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar. The storied Hanging Gardens of Babylon were counted among the "wonders" of the ancient world. The prophet Jeremiah predicted the overthrow of Babylon as divine retribution for her evil deeds (Jer 25:12–14; cf. Isaiah's prophecy in Isa 13:2–22 against the city of Babylon during the Assyrian period). In the NT,

Babylon symbolizes the decadence and wickedness of Rome (cf. 1Pe 5:13; Rev 14:8).

2 From the outset of the book, the record clearly indicates that Nebuchadnezzar's success is not entirely his own doing. The Lord "delivered" (cf. NASB, "gave") Jehoiakim into the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar in that he permitted the Babylonian subjugation of Judah. (See *NIDOTTE*, 3:206, on the use of the Heb. verb *nātan* ["to give"] to connote "hand over in judgment.") This introductory statement reveals the unifying theme for the whole book: God's sovereign rule of human history. God's judgment of the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah was not capricious or arbitrary. The threat of divine punishment, including exile from the land of the Abrahamic promise, was embedded in the blessings and curses of the Mosaic covenant (cf. Lev 18:24–30; 26; Dt 28). Owing to God's covenantal faithfulness, he was extremely patient and longsuffering with his people Israel, warning them through his prophets over centuries of the dire consequences of habitual covenantal disobedience (cf. Ne 9:29–32). Daniel was not oblivious to all this, as attested by his prayer for his people (Da 9:4–11).

Placing objects plundered from the temples of vanquished enemies as trophies of war in the temple(s) of the gods of the victors was common practice in the biblical world (e.g., 1Sa 5:2). The act symbolized the supremacy of the deities of the conquering nation over the gods of the peoples and nations subjugated by the imperialist armies (cf. *BBCOT*, 287). The articles or vessels from the Jerusalem temple confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar are not itemized. It is possible these articles were given as tribute to Nebuchadnezzar in order to lift the siege against the city (after the earlier example of the payments made by kings Ahaz and Hezekiah to the Assyrians; cf. 2Ki 16:8; 18:15). The temple treasury cache may have included gold and silver ceremonial cups and utensils displayed to the envoy

of the Babylonian king Merodach-Baladan by King Hezekiah a century earlier (cf. 2Ki 20:12–13). The prophet Isaiah rebuked Hezekiah's pride and predicted his treasures would be plundered and carried off to Babylon (Isa 39:6; cf. the prohibition in Dt 17:17 against stockpiling wealth given to the Hebrew kings in anticipation of an Israelite monarchy).

Later, King Belshazzar paraded these gold and silver goblets before his nobles at a great feast, precipitating the episode of the writing on the wall and the demise of his kingship (Da 5:1–2, 25–31). Finally, some of these implements may have been part of the larger inventory of temple treasure plundered by the Babylonians that King Cyrus of Persia restored to the Hebrews and that were relocated in Judah when the exiles returned to the land under the leadership of Sheshbazzar (Ezr 1:7–11). All this serves as a reminder that everything under heaven belongs to God and that he providentially oversees what belongs to him—whether his people Israel or drinking bowls from his temple (cf. Job 41:11).

The historical setting laid out in the opening verses is also important to the theology of exile developed in the book of Daniel. It is clear from Daniel's prayer in ch. 9 that he is aware of Jeremiah's prophecies projecting a Babylonian exile lasting some seventy years (Da 9:2; cf. Jer 25:12; 29:10). The date formulas in books of subsequent prophets of the exile, such as Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 52:31) and Ezekiel (e.g., Eze 1:2), serve as "covenantal time-clocks" of sorts as they track the chronological progression of God's judgment against his people for their sin of idolatry in anticipation of the restoration of Israel to the land of covenantal promise (Jer 44:3–6; cf. Lev 18:24–30). Elements of Daniel's "theology of exile" developed in later sections of the commentary include: the value of prayer for Hebrews in the Diaspora, the role obedience and faithfulness to God play in the success of the Hebrews in the Diaspora, and insights into the nature and character

of divine justice and human suffering in the light of the persecution experienced by Israel during and after the Babylonian exile.

More significant for the Hebrews was the crisis in theology created by the historical setting of the Babylonian exile. The Israelites, the people of Yahweh, lost possession of their land, had their temple razed, and had the office of kingship eradicated in one fell swoop to the marauding hordes of

King Nebuchadnezzar and the gods of Babylonia. As Wallace, 31, observes, the Hebrews needed a new theology. God's people needed a "Diaspora theology" addressing the problem of how to live as a minority group in an alien majority culture sometimes hostile, sometimes friendly; how were they to "fit in without being swallowed up?" The remainder of ch. 1 and the rest of the court stories take up the challenge of answering this very question.

NOTES

1 The form of the name נְבוּכַדְנֶצְצַר (*n^ebúkadne^ʿṣṣar*, "Nebuchadnezzar") given in Daniel is also found in 2 Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The alternative spelling נְבוּכַדְרֶצְצַר (*n^ebúkadre^ʿṣṣar*, "Nebuchadrezzar") appears in Jeremiah (except ch. 28) and Ezekiel. According to Wiseman (*Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 2–3), there is no need to assume that the name Nebuchadnezzar reflects an Aramaic pronunciation shift from *r* to *n* since an Aramaic tablet dated to Nebuchadrezzar's thirty-fourth year spells the name with *n* after the (dental) *d*. The name probably means "O Nabu, protect my offspring" (so Wiseman, *ibid.*, 3). Nabu was the son of Marduk and the god of wisdom in the Babylonian pantheon.

2 The phrase "in Babylonia" is literally a reference to "the land of Shinar" (cf. NIV note), a name for the whole of Mesopotamia found elsewhere in a handful of OT passages (Ge 10:10; 11:2; 14:1, 9; Jos 7:21; Isa 11:11; Zec 5:11). Daniel is the one exception in the OT where Shinar is used more restrictively to mean Babylonia. Shinar was the site of the tower of Babel (Ge 11:1–9), and according to Baldwin, 78, the reference is a deliberate archaism, since it "was synonymous with opposition to God; it was the place where wickedness was at home (Zec 5:11) and uprightness could expect opposition."

The phrase "his god" (לֹהֵאֱלֹהֵי, *lōhāw*) is a plural form, "his gods" (Archer, 32, observes that the Babylonians were polytheists). The writer may be making a subtle theological statement about "religious pluralism" in the ancient world, as the first divine name used is "Lord" in v.2—יְיָ, *ḏōnāy*, meaning God was "owner" or "sovereign ruler" for the Hebrews. The next divine epithet is "God" (אֱלֹהִים, *hā^elōhīm*), including the definite article (see Miller, 58). This designation for God by the Hebrews is often understood as a plural of majesty (cf. *NIDOTTE*, 1:405). The final reference to deity is this citation to the treasure house of "his god," i.e., Nabu, the patron deity of Nebuchadnezzar (see Notes on v.1). The divine names "Lord" and "God" may serve as foils emphasizing the supremacy of the one Hebrew God over the many "non-gods" of the Babylonian pantheon.

2. The Main Characters (1:3–7)

³Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility — ⁴young men without any physical

defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.⁵The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.⁷The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

COMMENTARY

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3–7 This unit introduces the protagonists of the story line of the book of Daniel. Four young men taken captive from Judah are identified by name as among those Israelites belonging to the royal family and Hebrew nobility deported to Babylonia (v.3). All four bore theophoric names (v.6) associating them with the God of the Israelites: “Daniel” (“God is my judge”), “Hananiah” (“Yah[weh] has been gracious”), “Mishael” (“Who is/what is God?”), and “Azariah” (“Yah[weh] has helped”).

The name “Ashpenaz” (v.3) is an attested proper name in Aramaic known from an incantation bowl dating to ca. 600 BC (cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 134). The name is associated with “lodging” in some manner and may mean “innkeeper.” His title, “chief of [the] court officials,” indicates a position of oversight vested with some degree of royal authority (since he was in a position to make a decision concerning Daniel’s request concerning food rations without appealing to a superior; v.8). Ashpenaz probably served both as a type of chamberlain overseeing the accommodations (i.e., “room and board”) for the captives and headmaster in terms of supervising the education of the captive foreign youth and approving them for “graduation” into the civil service corps upon completion of their prescribed period of training.

The policy of incorporating capable foreign captives in the civil service corps as officials of the king was widespread in the ancient world (cf. *BBCOT*, 730). Such practice had the benefit of depleting the leadership ranks in subjugated territories as well as harnessing that administrative potential in civil service to the ruling nation. Wiseman (*Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 81) has suggested that in Babylonian practice such “diplomatic hostages” were sometimes educated for eventual return to their homeland as loyal supporters of the Babylonian regime. This training or education was essentially a programmatic indoctrination of the captives in the worldview of a conquering nation (see Lucas, 53). The reprogramming included studies in the language and literature of the host nation (v.4), a special diet, and training in royal protocol (v.5). The goal or desired outcome was reorientation of the exiled individual in the thoughts, beliefs, and practices of the suzerain nation.

Typically, this reorientation included a change of name symbolic of the loyalty of the subject to a new king, his nation, and his gods. Accordingly, Daniel and his three friends became (v.7): “Belteshazzar” (“Bel [i.e., Marduk, the supreme god of the Babylonian pantheon] protects his life”), “Shadrach” (perhaps “command of Aku” [i.e., the

Sumerian moon-god] or “I am fearful of Aku”), “Meshach” (perhaps “Who is what [the god] Aku is?”), and “Abednego” (“servant of the shining one” or “servant of Neg[b]o” [i.e., Nabu, son of Marduk and patron deity of the scribal guild]; cf. Goldingay, 18, on naming and renaming in the OT).

Two things stand out in the passage: the exceptional qualifications of the young men chosen for the civil service training and the extensive nature and duration of that diplomatic training. Concerning the former, it is likely that Daniel and his friends were teenagers when they were taken captive from Judah and exiled to Babylonia, the presumption on the part of the Babylonians being that young boys generally would be more teachable and would be in a position to give more years of fruitful service to the state. Natural good looks and physical prowess were commonly associated with leadership in the biblical world (cf. 1Sa 9:2; 16:18). The three expressions referring to intellectual capabilities (v.4, “aptitude for ... learning, well informed, quick to understand”) should probably be regarded as synonyms for “gifted learners” rather than signifying distinctive aspects of the human intelligence (cf. Miller, 61). The cumulative effect of the triad simply stresses the emphasis King Nebuchadnezzar placed on inherent intellectual ability.

According to Wiseman (*Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon*, 86), Babylon prided itself on being the “city of wisdom,” a title that earlier belonged to Assur as the capital of Assyria. The schools of King Nebuchadnezzar’s day would have continued to copy “sign lists ... word lists, paradigms and extracts of legal terminology ... religious documents of all kinds ... fables, and omens of various categories including those about devils and evil spirits ... as well as texts of possible historical interest.” The language of the Babylonians (v.4) would have been the Akkadian dialect known as Neo-Babylonian. Beyond this, Daniel and his friends would have known several

other languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, and probably Persian.

Akkadian was a cuneiform writing system made up of wedge-shaped characters, commonly etched on clay tablets. The language was cumbersome and required learning hundreds of symbols, many with multiple syllabic values. Collins (*Daniel*, 140) has observed that length of Babylonian education varied depending on the specialization of the student (in some cases from ten to eighteen years). He further comments that the three-year instructional program for Daniel and his friends seems “unrealistically short for anyone who had no previous training in Akkadian letters.” Those who have studied the Akkadian language might be inclined to agree!

Mastery of Akkadian was accomplished by copying simple exercises set forth by an instructor, then advancing to the copying of important literary texts, and finally to the composition of original documents of various sorts. As Baldwin, 80, notes, to study Babylonian literature was “to enter a completely alien thought-world.” This Mesopotamian worldview was polytheistic in nature, superstitious in character, and pluralistic in practice. Lucas (*Daniel*, 53) summarizes that “the learning process intended for these Judean exiles was thus one of induction into the thought-world and culture of Babylonia.” This makes all the more remarkable the fact that Daniel and his friends were able to devote themselves to the study of Babylonian language and literature without compromising their faith in Yahweh and their Hebrew worldview. Baldwin, 80, aptly reflects, “evidently the work of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk had not been in vain.” Likewise, the Christian church needs individuals of faith who are “students” of the “language and literature” of modern culture both for the sake of effective gospel outreach (cf. Ac 17:22–28) and for discerning the spirits in terms of maintaining sound doctrine (cf. 1 Jn 4:1).

NOTES

3 The title רַב סָרִיסִים (*rab sārîs*), “chief of the court officials,” uses the Akkadian loan-phrase *rab-sārîs*, literally, “chief eunuch” (cf. Baldwin, 79). The expression occurs elsewhere as a designation for the “chief officer” of the king of Assyria (2Ki 18:17; cf. Jer 39:3, 13; understood in the NASB as a proper noun, “Rab-saris”). The use of castrated males as royal officials, since eunuchs were considered more loyal and trustworthy servants, is best attested during the Persian period (cf. Collins, *Daniel*, 134). The text of Daniel does not imply that the four Hebrew captives were made eunuchs. According to Collins (*ibid.*, 135), the notion that Daniel and his three companions were eunuchs as reported in rabbinic literature goes beyond the text. In fact Potiphar, a סָרִיס (*sārîs*, “official”), was a married man (Ge 39:1, 7).

4 The NIV renders the Hebrew כַּשְׁדִּים (*kašdîm*, “Chaldeans”) as “Babylonians.” From Assyrian royal inscriptions, the Chaldeans (Akk. *kaldû/kašdu*; Aram. כַּשְׁדָּי, *kašdāy*) are known to have inhabited the lowlands south of Babylon and north of Persia as early as the ninth century BC. The OT regularly equates the Chaldeans with the people of Babylonia in general, although the Babylonians did not identify themselves in this way (e.g., Isa 13:19; Jer 24:5; Eze 1:3; cf. Eze 5:12). Some scholars suggest that the word designates a special guild or priestly class of wise men (e.g., Collins, *Daniel*, 138; Goldingay, 16). It seems more likely that the term *kašdîm* as used in the context of v.4 (i.e., “the language and literature of ...”; cf. “all kinds of literature and learning” in v.17) refers more generally to the Chaldeans or Babylonians (as in Da 5:30; 9:1) and hence to the larger body of knowledge known and studied in Babylon.

5 The Hebrew phrase פַּת־בַּגַּת הַמֶּלֶךְ (*pat-bag hammelek*, lit., “fine-food of the king”) is an unusual OT expression found only in Daniel 1:5 and 11:26, rendered “food ... from the king’s table” (cf. NASB’s “the king’s choice food”). According to Baldwin, 81, the term is derived from Old Persian and refers to “honorific gifts from the royal table.” Similar gifts of “delicacies” from the royal table are mentioned in Genesis 43:34 and 2 Samuel 11:8.

7 The only other reference to Daniel’s Babylonian name occurs in 4:8, where context suggests that the name “Belteshazzar” is a theophoric name related to the Babylonian god Bel or Marduk. The name “Belteshazzar” may be a shortened form of the Akkadian [*Bēl*]-*balātišu-ušur* (“[Bel] protect his life”; cf. Miller, 65) or *Bēlet-šar-ušur* (“Lady, protect the king,” in reference to the consort of Bel; cf. Baldwin, 81; Lucas, 53).

3. The Plot (1:8–17)

⁸But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, ¹⁰but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”