

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 45

Daniel – Part One

Daniel is a book that scholars have merited great attention to over the centuries. Even Sir Isaac Newton wrote on the book (*Observations Upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John*, 1773). It was very popular in the Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Its stories have inspired young and old alike. Its prophecies have intrigued scholars and historians of all faiths. We will give Daniel two weeks of our time. Week one will deal with some background and the historical narratives of the first six chapters. Week two will address the prophecies and some background questions concerning date of authorship.

I. BACKGROUND

Who was Daniel?

If we keep the time framework provided in the lessons on Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and others, then we have a good historical placement for Daniel. In 605 B.C., the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar came into Judah to teach the rebellious Jews a lesson; he took a number of nobles and aristocrats into captivity back to Babylon. Among those taken was Daniel, a Jewish boy of royal descent.

What kind of book is Daniel?

Daniel contains two separate types of writings. The early chapters are set in a historical framework narrating events surrounding Daniel and the rulers of the day. The later chapters contain prophecies about the future of the Jews.

There is another way in which Daniel contains two types of writings. The languages used in the book are Hebrew and Aramaic. Hebrew is the Semitic language that was native to the Jewish nation. Aramaic is the more common Semitic language used by not only Hebrews but also other Semitic peoples in the Middle East. Aramaic was used in one form or another for at least 1,000 years prior to Christ.

The reason for the two languages is not known for certain. We do know that writings were done in two languages in that cultural period for an emphasis on what was written. Other theories about the usage of dual

languages include later translation work, multiple authorship, etc. Importantly, the Dead Sea scrolls produced eight Daniel manuscripts. All of these scrolls indicate the same presence of Aramaic and Hebrew (at least 4 of those scrolls have material from multiple language sections).

Daniel's placement in the scriptural canon is also interesting. In the traditional Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament is divided into three sections: The Law, The Prophets and the Other Writings. The book of Daniel is set in the section of "Other Writings" and not the Prophets. The Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek has the book in the section of the Prophets. A good argument is made that the Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls also placed Daniel in the Prophet section. The non-biblical scroll the *Florilegium* (4Q174) quotes Daniel 12:10 as written in the "book of Daniel the Prophet." This reference most likely indicates that this Jewish settlement classified Daniel among the prophets rather than the writings in the first and second centuries B.C. Where Daniel is placed pertains to some degree to the question of when Daniel was written, which will be addressed next week.

II. THE TEXT

A. CHAPTER ONE: IN THE KING'S SERVICE

Daniel begins by noting that in the third year of Judah's King Jehoiakim's reign,¹ Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon took Jehoiakim along with a number of Israelites captive. Once back in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that a number of the best of the noble boys were to endure three years of training to come into the King's service. These boys were assigned an appropriate measure of food and wine from the King's own table (quite an honor, if you think about it. The King would be enjoying the best of the food and wine the land had to offer).

Four of these boys were from Judah – Daniel and three friends. The four had their names changed to something more Babylonian. Daniel became "Belshazzar" and the three friends became "Shadrach," "Meshach," and "Abednego."

¹ This occurred in 605 B.C. By Babylonian reckoning, this was the third year because you would not count the year of ascension. By Judaic reckoning, the year of ascension WAS counted so this would be called the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign as it is in Jeremiah 25:1.

In spite of the nice requirement that the boys eat from the King's table, Daniel made a decision not to eat such un-kosher food or drink. Daniel implored the Chief Official over the three year preparations to allow the boys to eat only vegetables and to drink only water. The official was concerned, but agreed to a ten day probation period with the limited diet Daniel requested.

At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his friends were much healthier in appearance than the folks who had been grazing at the King's table. This test result allowed the boys to continue to dine kosher for the duration of this training period.

At the end of the three year preparation, Daniel and the three were head and shoulders above the others the King interviewed. For that matter, the King found them ten times better than those already in the King's service. God had blessed the boys with wisdom, knowledge and understanding, and King Nebuchadnezzar put the boys into his service.

B. CHAPTER TWO: THE DREAM

We will reference the content of this dream again next week when we look at the prophetic aspects of Daniel. The narrative behind the dream is the issue for this week.

Ever worked for a boss who asked the impossible? Try this one on for size: As we have already noted, Daniel worked for a pagan. King Nebuchadnezzar was Daniel's boss, and the king was not a follower of Yahweh! Two years into his reign, Nebuchadnezzar was having trouble sleeping. Recurrent nightmares were plaguing him.

The King's solution was to call in all his wise men to seek meaning behind the troubling dreams. The King was not content to recount the dream and listen to the interpretation. Instead, the King was insistent that the wise men recount the dream themselves and then interpret it. The King figured if the men could actually tell the King what he dreamed, then the King could rely on the interpretation being offered, figuring anyone insightful enough to intuit the dream ought to be insightful enough to interpret it.

The wise men were unable to follow the plan of the King. The wise men suggested that they were more than happy to interpret the dream

for the King, but that the King would need to tell them the dream first.

Nebuchadnezzar told the wise men that they were fakes and phonies who could not be relied on and ordered them all killed. At the point that the death sentence was relayed to Daniel, Daniel decided to find out what the dream and interpretation was from God. Daniel had his three friends (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) pray for him and Daniel prayed as well. Daniel went to the King and asked for a night to get it all figured out and then went home. That night, as Daniel slept, the Lord gave Daniel a vision of the dream and its interpretation. The next morning, Daniel was ready to go!

Daniel went in to Nebuchadnezzar and told him the dream and its interpretation. Nebuchadnezzar was astonished that Daniel could do such a thing. Daniel explained that he was no more able to do so than anyone else, but the Lord was the source of the information. King Nebuchadnezzar then saw and proclaimed that Daniel's God was in fact the God above all Gods. Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel himself and awarded Daniel with great gifts.

C. *CHAPTER THREE: SHADRACH, MESHACH, AND ABEDNEGO AND THE FIERY FURNACE (a/k/a A RISKY WAY FOR A PROMOTION!)*

King Nebuchadnezzar had an immense 90 foot high gold statue of himself constructed in the plains of Dura (Babylon). The order that went with the statue was that whenever a musical instrument started playing, all the people were to fall to the ground and worship the statue. The penalty for failure to do so was typical for treason in most any society – death. It was not a nice civilized death, either, but death by burning in a “fiery furnace.”

Obviously, worshiping such an image was wrong for the Jews. Aside from common sense, it was a flat violation of the commandment not to worship any graven image. Remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from Chapter One? At this point, they were in a nice job administering the state affairs for the province of Babylon, home of the 90-foot statue. These three had their lives and jobs because of their obedience to God in the first place (or first chapter, if you prefer). One can see the picture of what happened when these fellows were in range of the statue and music started. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego really stood out in

a crowd! Literally! The crowd would fall down and worship the statue and the three Jews would remain standing.

When this “treason” was brought to the attention of the King Nebuchadnezzar, he was “furious with rage.” Rather than just immediately burn the three lads, the king had a work meeting with them. He reminded them that he was not only their boss, but also their ruler. He did this by explaining to them anew what the rules were when music played for those around the statue and also by reminding them of the consequences of disobedience.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had a very important response to the King. They explained that they would not violate God’s commands on his behalf. They also noted that God was **able** to save them even from the furnace, that God **would** save them from the fiery furnace, but that even if God **did not**, then they would still not violate God’s commands and worship the King or his gods.

The King did not take this well. He was no longer satisfied with throwing the three into the furnace. The king ordered the furnace heated to seven times its normal level. Also, he ordered the three bound and tossed into the furnace fully clothed with robes, trousers, turbans, etc. (no doubt the clothes made for easy burning and a spectacular display with the flames). In the King’s words, “what god will be able to save you from my hand?” (3:15).

When the three were thrown into the fire, the excessive heat from the overheated furnace actually killed the soldiers who got too close when throwing in the three Jews. The king was watching for the burning display when he did a double take. The king had three Jews thrown into the furnace bound and tied. On inspection, however, the King saw four unbound men walking around in the furnace untied and free, and one of the four looked “like a son of the gods” (3:25).

Nebuchadnezzar shouted for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to come out of the fiery furnace. When the three did so, not only were they unharmed, but also their clothes did not even smell like smoke. The chapter that started with a statue and a plan for all to fall and worship the King ends with the King worshipping Yahweh and proclaiming him “Most High God.” The King then orders all in the land not to “say anything against the god of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.”

The story ends with...a promotion for the three fellows.

D. *CHAPTER FOUR: THE TREE DREAM*

Chapter Four is a missive the King sent out to the people to explain some extraordinary events in the King's life. The King explained that he was home, happy and prosperous when he again started having bad dreams. The King called in his advisers for some dream interpretation...and this time he was even willing to tell them the dream first!

The dream does not seem too hard to interpret, but the wise men were unable (or unwilling) to do so. In their shoes, even armed with the interpretation, I might think twice about telling the King as well. The expression that comes to mind involves shooting the messenger....

The dream was one of a huge tree that grew up to the heavens. The trunk was broad, the branches filled the sky, the leaves were many, and the fruit abundant. All the birds were at peace roosting in the tree and the beasts of the field found their home and food grazing underneath the boughs. Then, a holy messenger comes down from heaven and orders the tree to be devastated down to its trunk, which would be allowed to remain in the ground. The tree somehow becomes a person (you know how dreams are!) and after being destroyed, the tree/person is drenched with the dew, forced to graze on the land, and given the mind of an animal instead of a man. This dream was the one to be interpreted.

When the wise men were unsuccessful, Daniel was called before the King. The King recounted the dream to Daniel. Upon hearing the dream, Daniel was not in a hurry to tell the king its meaning. Daniel's "thoughts terrified him" (4:19). The King was insistent that Daniel tell him the meaning, good or bad.

Daniel explained to the King that the King was the tree, and all Babylon fed from and lived oriented to the King. Heaven had decreed, however, that Nebuchadnezzar was going to basically go insane and be as an animal of the field, stripped of his power and rule. The trunk was an indication that Nebuchadnezzar would not be totally finished as King, but would be restored once he recognized the role of the Most High God in his life and kingdom. After giving the interpretation, Daniel urged the King to get to the end of the

dream quickly by repenting of his sins, being kind to the oppressed, and acknowledging God. Nebuchadnezzar did not do so.

Over the next year, at a particularly haughty moment, the King's dream came true. The King went crazy and spent a good deal of time living out in the fields, eating grass and behaving sub-human. Once the King reached a point where he acknowledged the Most High God, his fortunes reversed again, his sanity was restored and he went back into his role as King.

The missive ends with the King praising the Most High God and urging the people to realize God's ability to humble the proud.

E. CHAPTER FIVE: THE WRITING ON THE WALL

After the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, history gives us the reign of King Belshazzar (not to be confused with Daniel's Babylonian name "Belteshazzar"). King Belshazzar is the focus of chapter five.

Belshazzar is giving an extravagant drinking party with a thousand of his closest friends and co-workers when the decision is made to continue the drinking but with the gold drinking cups that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. As the people are carousing with God's holy ware, a hand appears and writes a mysterious message on the wall. When "the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall" (5:5), the King's "face turned pale," "his knees knocked," and "his legs gave way." The King sought out someone to read and explain the writing on the wall, but no one was able to do so. The Queen then came into the room and told the King about Daniel's historic ability to give solutions to problems like that of the kings. So, the King calls Daniel in for counsel.

The King offers Daniel much finery if Daniel can explain the message. Daniel says he has no use for the King's payment, but will explain the message anyway. Daniel tells the King that humility is missing from his character and reign. Daniel then tells the King about the writing on the wall. The message indicates that the King's days are numbered, the King had been weighed and found wanting, and that the King's kingdom was going to be divided up between the Medes and the Persians.

That very night Daniel's interpretation became reality. King Belshazzar was murdered and the Medes and Persians conquered his kingdom. Belshazzar saw, but did not SEE the writing on the wall...

F. CHAPTER SIX: DANIEL AND THE LION'S DEN

Under Darius the Mede, the government is set up with three administrators. One of those three is Daniel. The other administrators and bureaucrat want Daniel taken down so they can climb the ladder of success over his back. They scour Daniel's records to find something to hold over his head, but they are unsuccessful because "he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4). The back-stabbers decide they will have to find something related to the law and Daniel's "god" in order to bring Daniel down.

The men coax an unknowing Darius into signing a decree of the Medes and Persians (which cannot be revoked!) that no one is to pray to any god or man other than Darius for a period of thirty days. Disobedience to this would amount to treason and be punished by placement in the lion's den.

Of course, Daniel continued his habit of daily prayer to God. Rather than mutter something silently under his breath, Daniel continued to go into his home, into a room with a window facing Jerusalem, and fall on his knees in prayer three times daily.

Here, the back-stabbers find here their opportunity. They catch Daniel praying and bring him to the Darius for punishment. Darius is upset because he treasures Daniel and does not want to see him harmed. Without a legal solution, Daniel is thrown into the lion's den but not without Darius himself offering a prayer to Daniel's "God" on Daniel's behalf!

Daniel stays in the den overnight. With the dawn, the stone is rolled back to show Daniel delivered by the hand of God. With much rejoicing, Darius then feeds the back-stabbers to the lions instead. Daniel is saved because of Daniel's "trust" in God (6:23) and Darius is moved to praise God as well.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Go with God and you will never go wrong.
2. God CAN save you from ANYTHING.
3. Do right, regardless of the consequences.
4. We are not promised worldly success from doing right.
5. We are to do right anyway.
6. We can thrive, even with pagan bosses.
7. God opposes the proud. PERIOD.