

Daniel 1: Mind Over Matter

INTRODUCTION

Daniel 1 sets the pace for the rest of the book. One of the first methods of Bible interpretation is explained in this chapter (see the section on spiritual insight and practical application). Daniel and his friends take a stand for God, and God takes a stand for them. This chapter highlights the application of faith under difficult circumstances. How should a Christian live among non-believers? What should he or she do when personal choices will have an impact on non-believers?

If you do not know how to read this chapter in Hebrew, it can be helpful to read it in more than one translation. Keep in mind that we also face many opportunities to choose between matter over mind, or mind over matter. Do we base our decisions on the path of least difficulty? Or do we make all our choices based on what is right? And if our choices are based on what is right, how can we do this and still be tactful in our dealings with those who disagree with us?

THEOLOGICAL TOOLS

For a discussion on the challenges with the date in Daniel 1:1 see the previous chapter in the syllabus.

Daniel 1:1, 2

Note that this captivity was no accident. Strangely, the Lord gave Jehoiakim into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. In this case, "the Lord" is not the Hebrew word, יהוה [Yahweh]. It is the word, אֲדֹנָי [Adonai].¹

Note: the exodus happened around 1450 B.C. (in round numbers). The kingdom was divided into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, in 930 B.C. Israel, the northern kingdom, went into captivity in 722 B.C. (under Assyrian rule). Judah, the southern kingdom, went into captivity in three successive stages: 605, 597, and 586 B.C. (see the previous chapter in the syllabus). There would never again be an earthly king for God's people.

How do God's people live in Babylon? We live today as they did in Daniel's day--in an alien kingdom. Many readers like to rush through the narrative portions of

¹And yet, even though God sent Nebuchadnezzar to be a leader, Daniel had to mentor Nebuchadnezzar (this point was noted by Joshua Sunderland in a class presentation given on 5 January 2006).

Daniel in order to jump into the "real meat" of the book, the prophetic portions. But this is to miss some very important points. Why were the narrative portions of the book included? These are stories of real people who face real crises. They are the remnant of their time. As we study their experiences, we can gain insights into how we should live as a kind of last day remnant. Or, put another way, the prophetic sections deal with the macrocosm. How does God work through the big picture of persecution through history and in the last days? The narrative portions of the book deal with the microcosm. They give real-life examples of individuals standing for truth no matter what the personal cost may be.

Themes in the book of Daniel

This attack (Daniel 1:1,2) took place in 605 B.C. At this time, vessels were taken from the temple (but the temple was not destroyed). The Bible only records two sides. There are no gray areas in this story.

In Daniel 1:1 the conflict is on the level of king verses king. In Daniel 1:2, the conflict is on the level of God verses gods. But this multi-level form of attack actually is recorded in order to set the pace for the whole book. In fact, it becomes a way to understand what will happen in the prophetic sections of the book. These two brief verses reveal the theme for the rest of the book. This theme includes three major parts:

1. Nebuchadnezzar attacks the city and the sanctuary (the temple).
2. Nebuchadnezzar takes God's people into captivity.
3. Nebuchadnezzar takes the sacred vessels of God's sanctuary dedicated to the true worship of God, and he places them in a pagan temple.

TWO EXAMPLES:

Here are two examples of how the theme of Daniel 1:1,2 plays itself out throughout other parts of the book.

1. THE LITTLE HORN POWER

In Daniel 8:9-12, the little horn power (the antichrist) does the same thing that Nebuchadnezzar did.

1. He attacks the sanctuary (8:11).
2. In the captivity, he attacks God's people and removes them from the sanctuary (8:10-12).
3. The truth of the sanctuary is thrown down (8:12).

2. THE KING OF THE NORTH

In Daniel 11:31-33, the king of the north (the antichrist) does the same thing as the little horn (and the same thing as king Nebuchadnezzar).

1. He attacks the sanctuary (11:31)

2. He takes God's people into captivity (11:33).
3. He stops the service of the sanctuary and sets up his own counterfeit (11:31).

Nebuchadnezzar's attack on God's ancient people is a paradigm or pattern of the Satanic attack of the antichrist in history and at the very end of time.

New Names

Daniel 1:3-7

The person who names is the one who has authority over the one named.² In order to show that their gods were superior to the God of Israel, the Babylonians gave new names to the four young captives. The Hebrew names are listed in Daniel 1:6. The Babylonian names are listed in Daniel 1:7. It is interesting to note that throughout the book of Daniel, the Hebrew names are normally used for Daniel's three friends unless the section is from the perspective of the Babylonians (in which case the Babylonian names are used). For Daniel, his Hebrew name is used throughout the book with a very rare occasional exception. This is normally true, even when a section is using the perspective of the Babylonians (cf. Dan. 4:12 [Engl.] where both names are used).

The Hebrew names are as follows:

NAME ³	MEANING
דָּנִיֵּאל [Daniel] / also written as דְּנִיָּאל	אֱלֹ [El] (God) is my Judge
חַנַּנְיָהּ [Chananyah] (Hananiah)	יְהוָה [Yahweh] has been gracious
מִישָׁאֵל [Mishael]	Who is what אֱלֹ [El] (God) is?
עֲזַרְיָה [Azaryah] (Azariah)	יְהוָה [Yahweh] has helped

The Babylonian names are recorded as they are transliterated into Hebrew. Since I cannot write Akkadian words with this word processor (and I do not know how even if I had the right software) I will merely use the traditional transliterations of their names.

²An example of this is in Gen 2:19,20 where Adam names the animals as an indication of his authority, or dominion over them (Gen 1:27,28).

³The names are written in the original Hebrew form followed by the transliterated form in [brackets]. If there is a common English form of the name which is a little different from the transliterated form, it is recorded in (parentheses).

NAME

Beltshazzar [Balatsu-usur]
Shadrach [Susur-Aku]
Meshach [Mi-sha-Aku]

MEANING

Balat (the god Saturn) protect his life
command of Aku (the moon god)
who is what Aku (the moon god) is

NAME

Abednego
[some scholars think it is:]

MEANING

servant of god Nego
servant of god Nebo (patron god of science
and literature)

A comparison of the Hebrew names with the corresponding Babylonian names quickly reveals that the meanings overlapped. The difference was that instead of proclaiming honor to the true God of Israel, these new names now honored the gods of Babylon. Scholars have disagreed over the way to interpret the meanings of these various Babylonian names. Daniel Burke noted that there is a good reason why there is disagreement between scholars who seek to interpret the meaning of the Babylonian names of Daniel and his three friends. In each case, it appears that the author of the biblical book wanted to show that he did not support the use of such names. Since the actual names would praise heathen gods, each name was modified in some small way so that it no longer gave such honor. It would have been obvious to the original readers that Daniel was not praising the heathen gods (since he had warped the names to avoid this). Yet, at the same time, there would be enough similarity so that the bilingual reader would have been able to figure out what the actual names had been.⁴

Strive to be pure

Daniel 1:8

This is possibly the most important verse in Daniel 1. It is written in a very specific way in Hebrew.

⁴This concept is taken from Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel: Wisdom and Dreams of a Jewish Prince in Exile* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 18, 19. Daniel Burke noted that this system was used in order for the reader to know who Daniel was talking about without actually giving honor to the specific gods involved (this was shared in a class presentation on 8 January 2007). This was a kind of resistance to bearing the name of a pagan god.

וַיִּשֶׁם דָּנִיֵּאל עַל-לִבּוֹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִתְגַּאֵל . . .

[wayyasem Daniel 'al-libbo asher lo-yithgaal]⁵ (And Daniel set upon his heart that he would not make himself impure . . .).

The last word in the sentence is the Hithpael form of the word גָּאֵל [gaal]. It looks like another word, spelled the same way which has no Hithpael form. The other word גָּאֵל [gaal] means to ransom or redeem someone or something (in its qal form)⁶. But these two words should not be confused with each other. Daniel did not want to make himself impure.

There were at least three ways in which he could be made impure by eating this food.

1. Contextual: Identification with Nebuchadnezzar who was the "provider" of 2 temples. The one partaking of food was identifying himself with the gods to whom it had been dedicated.
2. Identity and communion with the king of Babylon.
3. The person who eats unclean foods would defile himself (cf. Lev. 11).

In these three ways, Daniel could defile himself or make himself impure by eating the food. But notice this portion of the sentence again:

וַיִּשֶׁם דָּנִיֵּאל עַל-לִבּוֹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִתְגַּאֵל . . .

[wayyasem Daniel 'al-libbo asher lo-yithgaal] (And Daniel set upon his heart that he would not make himself impure . . .).

The beginning of this sentence catches my eye. It begins with: וַיִּשֶׁם [wayyasem] (and he set. . .). This is exactly the same Hebrew word which begins Daniel 1:7. The Babylonians "set names for them." Daniel "set upon his heart" to be pure. Daniel and his three friends were "fighting fire with fire". While they cooperated as much as they could,

⁵Note that in Hebrew, the words are read from right to left, not as in English where words are read from left to right.

⁶Hitpael and Qal are two forms of Hebrew verbs. Each Hebrew word can be inflected in various ways which are identified by titles such as Qal, Nifal, Piel, Pual, Hiffal, Hoffal, and Hithpael. For a better understanding of the way these forms change the basic meaning, please refer to a basic Hebrew grammar.

they drew the line when it came to personally going against conscience. The same determination which was exercised against them in the choice of names would be exercised by them in order to remain pure.⁷

This is a basic Christian principle. We are to strive to be pure. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

Daniel was in an awkward position. He had to make a decision which would involve non-believers. His example gives us much to consider. See the practical section entitled, "The process of making an exception" for notes on what Daniel did. This choice gave God the opportunity to demonstrate His power.

Daniel was specific in what he asked to be permitted to eat. The word is written two different ways in Daniel 1. It is written as זְרַעִים [zero'im] (Daniel 1:12) and as זְרַעִיִם [zer'onim] (Daniel 1:16). This is related to the word זֶרַע [zera'] which means seed. This word is translated as seeds or as vegetables. It is plant based. The KJV translated this as Pulse. This was a very good translation at the time. But most people of our day do not know this particular use of the word, Pulse. This word means: Leguminous plants and their seeds. As such, it was an almost perfect translation for the Hebrew word. But it might be better to translate with a few words in modern English (i.e. beans, seeds, and vegetables).

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT / PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The process of making an exception

Daniel had a challenge. He could not eat what had been provided. He did the natural thing and went to the person of high authority who had the power to change the details of what was required (1:3-9). But, Ashpenaz feared that he could lose his own life if he made an exception. What could Daniel do? He realized that whatever he did next, tact and courtesy were of the utmost importance.⁸ His next move may be surprising, but it actually worked better than the alternative. We often think that if we get blocked in our plans or in our needs that we should go to someone higher in authority. Note what Daniel did.

⁷In a class presentation given 6 January 2005, Shiloh Hooker noted that when we purpose in our hearts to honor God's will and to accomplish something, He will be there to give us power to obey.

⁸Taken from a class presentation by Diana Santos given on 8 January 2004.

Daniel 1:11-16

Daniel went to Melzar, a person of lower authority. When the higher authority said, no, Daniel went to the person under him. But that is not all. He provided a chance for five things to happen.

1. God could demonstrate His power.
2. There could be a test of limited duration.
3. The person in charge could view the results.
4. There would be objective ways to measure what had happened.
5. They could be true to conscience while submitting to authority.

If Daniel had not stood firm, he would have "tied God's hands" so to speak. When we are true to conscience, God has an opportunity to exercise His power.

Daniel 1:17-20 (especially verse 17)

When Daniel submitted himself to the will of God, he was blessed with knowledge and understanding. This was not merely his natural skill. It was a gift from God. It was said that in matters of wisdom and knowledge Daniel and his friends were 10 times better than all of the other wise men. In the Akkadian language, certain characters could be read in up to 10 different ways. This could require the brightest minds to be diligently applied to the various subjects. The God of heaven made His faithful followers a cut above the rest.

But this brings to mind our awesome responsibility. Since God is the one who is giving His people talents, He expects them to develop these talents. Daniel and his three friends did develop their God-given talents. We need to heed their example and do the same.⁹

If we want to understand prophecy, just like Daniel, we must be willing to be faithful to the truths that God has given to us. The stance of our heart toward God will determine if we "pass the test" and receive divine help to more fully understand the prophecies.

John 7:17 If we will do God's will, God will help us to understand truth.
John 17:17 God's truth is found in His Word.

Psalm 119:9-11 God's Word gives us strength to stay loyal in the face of adversity.

James 1:5-7 Wisdom is a product of faith and obedience.

God is the one who gives His people talents. God allowed them to perform better than others. And their performance was not just twice as good or three times as good as

⁹Taken from a class presentation by Rachel Lombart given on 8 January 2004.

the others. They were 10 times better than the others. We can find hope in this example. God helps us to do well in school. We do not have to try and come up with all of the performance on our own. We can come to God for the abilities which we need in an academic environment.¹⁰

This also tells us something about our responsibility in making right choices. These young men went against eating wrong food. And God gave them clearer minds to understand visions and to perform at a higher intellectual level than the others.¹¹

Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus (Daniel 1:21). This reminds us of our long term responsibility. Each day we are faced with decisions. We could deceive. Or we could be faithful. If we are faithful, a new kingdom comes. Even though it may seem that everything depends upon giving in to the current power, a new kingdom will come one day.¹²

The book of Daniel is the one Biblical book which Jesus told His followers that they should read and understand (Matthew 24:15). This was especially true for the last days (Matthew 24:14). The way we can do this best is to follow the example of Daniel.

¹⁰From a class presentation by Jung Hee "Thomas" Hong given on 5 January 2006.

¹¹Taken from a class presentation by Bianca Henriquez given on 5 January 2006.

¹²Noted in a class presentation by Eva Metzová.