

# Daniel

## Background.

Few books have had a more controversial background than Daniel. One group argue that he is a genuine post exilic prophet, writing during or just after the return from Exile. Others argue that it was written during the second century B.C.E.

The Jewish canon places it among the writings, and not even in the Minor prophets, but the Christian canon, strongly influenced by the LXX, places it after the four major prophets. Part of it is in Aramaic, and part in Hebrew. Those who support a late date point out that the writer gets more accurate in his history the nearer to the later date he gets. Others argue that as a prophet, he would be able to “forth tell” events from the earlier date.

What kind of book is Daniel? It is not natural prophetic, nor is it natural apocalyptic.

Plenty to argue about here, and the arguments continue. Let’s accept all this, and turn to the text, to see what Daniel is trying to teach us.

## Abbreviations used:-

**B.C.E.** - Before Christian era.

**C.E.** - Christian era.

**LXX** – Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament.

**Cor.** – Corinthians

**N.I.V** - New International version

**A.V.**- Authorised ( King James) version

## Daniel Chapter 1

**V.1-2**

Daniel and his friends were transported to Babylon somewhere between B.C.E. 605 and B.C.E. 586. We do not need to go into all the intricacies of this dating. It's enough, for our study, to know that this was the historical sequence. What lay behind it was a double tragedy - the destruction of Israel, and the loss of the heritage. But one of the joys of the book of Daniel is that it teaches that in God's economy, nothing is lost. Daniel and his friends were to prove a sign of God's abiding love for those he has chosen. That's what makes Daniel such a good message for our day, where faith is weak, and the future, in human terms, uncertain.

### **V.3-7**

The king was not a fool. He needed skilled men to help run his vast empire, so he chose the best from those he captured and trained them in Babylonian ways. Josephus says that Daniel and his friends were members of Zedekiah's family. They were certainly of high standing, so were good candidates for the Babylonian bureaucracy.

Sounds good, but there was a cost – the loss of identity. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah lost their Hebrew names. In Hebrew thought a name was a most treasured possession, designating not only heritage but also the blessing God would bestow. Prophets had predicted all this -take a look at Isaiah 39:7: **“And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the place of the King of Babylon.”**

Daniel was renamed **“Belteshazzar”** – “Protect his life.” Hananiah became **“Shadrach”** – “Command of Aku,” ( Moon god) Mishael” became **“Meshach”** – “Who is what Aku is” and Azaruah became **“Abednego”** – “servant of Nebo.” (a god. All the Babylonian names are references to pagan deities.

### **V.8-10**

Faith, both Old and New testament, is very strong on purity. Daniel sees the issue clearly, and opts for purity, but not with aggression or pride. One of the hallmarks of Daniel is his awareness of the position of others, so he is well aware of the difficult position of the Chief Official. Yet even with this man God had been at work, and he showed **“favour and sympathy”** to Daniel and his friends.

## V.11-14

Daniel suggests a simple test, to which the officials agree.

## V.15-21

Daniel passed the test with ease, and consequently, everyone became vegetarian. What the other trainee diplomats thought of this we have to leave to our imagination! After the test, we are told that Daniel and his friends had **“knowledge and understanding.”** We see here that God gave these gifts. Apostle Paul would totally agree with this understanding. (1 Cor.3:6) But Daniel had an extra gift - the ability to interpret visions and dreams. This gift will come to the fore in chapter 2, but we are being taught here that even this gift came from God. It's good to be reminded of this, but Daniel understood it very well, as we shall see.

Daniel's integrity won out in the end, and the King acknowledged their wisdom and understanding. We can say “yes” to this after the event, but at the time, Daniel took a high risk. Having integrity in our Faith, and sticking to it under all circumstances can be a very high risk strategy, as we shall see.

## Daniel Chapter 2

### V.1-13

The story begins with Nebuchadnezzar having a dream. The narrative takes a strange turn at v 4, when the text moves from Hebrew to Aramaic, and stays in that language until the end of chapter 7. The king proves to be shrewd. He was convinced that his astrologers would give him the interpretation he wanted. We see the same with the challenge to Micaiah ben Imlah. (1 Kings 22: 1-13) So he demand that they tell him the dream first, and if they couldn't, then they would die.

### V. 14-23

Daniel hears of this, and, asking for time, he seeks God and **“during the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision.”** As a result of this, Daniel does not

rush around claiming any position, but turns his heart and mind to the Lord in praise and thanksgiving.

A powerful lesson here to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How quick people are to claim divine power and insight, and how slow to put the glory and praise where it belongs. Servant hearts are in short supply in our day. It's good to see that Daniel has such a heart. Little wonder that he rose to a great position in Babylon. The King could see that in him, there was a man of a different spirit. (Caleb:-Numbers 14:24. David: Acts 13:22)

### **V.24 to end**

Daniel gets to see the King, but puts down his spiritual marker before he starts:

**“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.”**

Then Daniel explains the dream, which briefly is this:

- \* The head is of gold, representing Babylon
- \* The chest and arms are of silver, representing the Medes/Persians
- \* The belly/thighs are of bronze, representing Greece
- \* The legs and feet are iron and clay, representing Rome.

What are we to make of all this? It could be prophetic, looking forward from the Babylonian times, or it could be prophetic, looking back from the Greco or Roman period. How are we to explain such a clear and definite division of history? Are there 4 kingdoms, or 5 – dividing the Mede and the Persians? ? (Theodoret, writing from Antioch in the Christian era struggled to get 4!)

I think that asking these questions, good though they are, is missing the point, which comes toward the end of the dream and interpretation – the kingdom which will not fall. Daniel's world view should have been shaken by the Exile, but he had a wider and deeper understanding. He would have agreed with Hebrews: “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” (Hebs.13:14) God is Lord of history, He is never defeated, and does not

abandon his people. One day, all will be revealed, but in the meantime, let us live in the hope of that moment.

What a great encouragement this must have been for those reading it. If they were in Exile, or just returned, they would be encouraged. If they were living in the terrible time of Antiochus Epiphanes, they would have been encouraged. If we are living in the very troubled 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can be encouraged. Our God reigns. He always did, he does and he will.

## **Daniel Chapter 3**

### **V.1**

Wow! Big statue – 90 feet by 9 feet or approx. 30 metres by 3 metres, overlaid with gold.

### **V.2-6**

“Worship”:- This word in Aramaic, (“Segid”) suggests worship of a deity, probably the god Marduk, principle god of Babylon. Obviously, no God-fearing person could do this - not in Daniel’s day or our own. As with all tyrants, Nebuchadnezzar imposes a serious punishment for failure to worship – an odd position for us who understand worship as something offered freely!

### **V.7-12**

Everybody worshipped! They knew what the King expected them to do, and they did it. But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not worship. How could they? Their allegiance was to Yahweh alone. The Astrologers, who had been made to look foolish by Daniel, were quick to point these 3 men out. Among the mighty crowd, traitors were needed to attack God’s people. There have always been plenty of such people. The charge against them was well worked out:-

- \* They paid no attention to the king and his decrees
- \* They did not serve the king’s gods.
- \* They refused to worship the statue.

## V. 13-18

The king was “beside himself” with rage. Like so many people, he had a short memory. It was from this group that the answer to his dream came, and as a result he praised God. Now he gives way to fury. He calls the men forward, and tells them to obey, or face his punishment. This has always been the way with tyrants. Shadrach and his friends saw through all this bluster, knowing exactly what to expect. But their reply has echoed down the years:-

**“The God we serve is able to save us..and he will rescue us from your hand O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know O king that we will not serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”**

This is the total trust in God which is essential, and is lacking in our day. First Shadrach and his friends say that God is able to save. Alleluia! But sometimes, for his own greater purpose, God does not save, but allows evil things to have their way. Any Christian can say “alleluia” to God’s saving power, but it takes a tough Christian to say “alleluia” when God does not appear to save but allows evil to triumph. We need both sides of faith - the joy and the determination. Without it, the Church will be weak, and the enemy will triumph. We have to be willing to lay down our lives in the cause, as well as rejoice in it.

## V.19-23

The king was “**filled with rage.**” (N.I.V. “Furious” is a little weak.) So into the furnace they go - a furnace so hot that it kills those appointed to tend it.

## V.24-27

**“I see four men walking around.”** Shadrach and his friends were bound when they were thrown into the fire, but now are seen to be free and walking around. Who was the fourth figure? Jewish scholars suggest that it was an angel – possibly Gabriel. But the king sees this fourth figure as **“like a son of the gods”**, either a supernatural being, or one who has the substance of deity. A.V translates “the Son of God”, but modern translations go for “like a son of the gods.” Nebuchadnezzar was a worshipper of many gods, and could have had little appreciation of the Trinity.

For many modern commentators, this fourth person was Jesus, who did appear in the O.T. as the “angel of the Lord.”

Either way, the manifestation of the fourth figure and the safety of Shadrach and his friends had the desired effect. **“Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out. Come here!”** Quite what he understood by this we cannot really know. But we know what we believe about it! “Our God is able to save.”

It is now the Jewish men who have the upper hand. They have passed through the fire - both spiritually and literally, and God has not abandoned them.

It’s interesting to note that Shadrach and his friends were at their safest and strongest when they were in the fire. The writer to the Hebrews suggests the same. (Hebs.11).

### **V.28-30**

Nebuchadnezzar testifies to God’s ability to save, and also he testifies to the faith and trust of these three men. It’s good for us to be reminded that God shows himself mostly through his actions in our lives. We are his living stones.(1 Peter 2:5)

Like most tyrants, he makes a complete reversal of his previous position. Originally punishment would come if anyone did not worship the statue. Now anyone who speaks against Yahweh will be punished. It’s an inconsistent picture, and the statue stays in place. But for many, the journey to faith in God is inconsistent. We only have to look at the Apostle Paul’s letters to his Corinthian church to see this truth within the Christian faith. At least Nebuchadnezzar is on the way to understanding. Meanwhile Shadrach and his friends get a well-deserved promotion, and God now has influence in the high places of Babylonian activity.

## **Daniel Chapter 4**

### **V.1-3**

Nebuchadnezzar begins by giving praise and glory to the God of Israel – for the **“miraculous signs and wonders”** he has done. So far, we have only seen 2, so we might wonder if the date here might be later in his reign, when he had seen much more. He’s got a big grasp of God – his wonders are **“mighty”**, his kingdom is **“eternal”** and lasts from **“generation to generation.”**

## V.4-17

The king was prosperous, and living at peace and contentment. Then comes the dream! He sends for Daniel, who he knows is a godly man, and shares his dream.

He saw a massive tree - fruitful, and a place of shelter. Then a **“holy one”** came down from heaven, and ordered the destruction of the tree, except for its stump which was bound in iron and bronze and left in the ground. The King was to be reduced to the life of an animal, and the reason? **“That the living might know that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets them over the lowliest of men.”** The “holy one” was probably an angel, a “Watcher.” (Ezek. 1:18). The stump suggests the hope that one day the tree might grow again. The time of the King’s animal like existence is limited – probably 7 years. The reason for this punishment would appear to be Nebuchadnezzar’s pride.

**V.18** Daniel is asked to interpret the dream. Unlike the dream in chapter 2, Daniel doesn’t have to be sought out. Nebuchadnezzar knows who he wants to interpret: **“But you can (interpret) because the spirit of the holy gods is with you.”**

## V.19-26

Daniel is greatly troubled. Was he afraid for his life if he gave the interpretation? Perhaps, but we know that he is a brave man, unafraid of the consequences of righteous action. Nebuchadnezzar encourages him not to be afraid to speak out, but Daniel underlines his concern - and it is not for himself but for the King! Remember how he was concerned for the official in chapter 1? He is that kind of man - aware of the needs of others. He realises that dream is bad news for the king – and wishes it were not so. We can be confident of the genuineness of his concern.

The interpretation: - The tree is the King, who has influence over the whole earth. The holy one has warned that Nebuchadnezzar will lose his position, and be reduced to living like an animal for seven times, until he acknowledges that God is Lord of all the earth. Then the kingdom will be restored to the King.

## V.27

Daniel issues a call to repentance **“Renounce your sin by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that your prosperity will continue.** May be, but in this challenge we see the difficulty of O.T. theology. This works based call just won't work. Our human nature just cannot hold to such a line. Salvation by grace, not work, as Jesus would show us.

## V.28-36

God gave Nebuchadnezzar one year to repent, but sadly we see him saying **“Is not this the great Babylon I have built as a royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”** Then the Lord activated the dream, and Nebuchadnezzar become like an animal. But when the time had passed, he came to his senses and praised God **“Then I praised the Most High. I honoured and glorified him who lives forever.”** As always with the Lord, repentance opens the way back to his presence. Nebuchadnezzar was restored. His final words in the Bible were **“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride, he is able to humble.”**

What are we to make of these first 4 chapters, while Nebuchadnezzar was King? The message is simple - if you decide to take God on, you will lose! In chapter 4 this comes dramatically out into the open. Nebuchadnezzar has met God's men (chapter 1), has seen God's power (chapter 3) but still would not submit to the ways of God. In pride he rises up - and loses. But here is the heart of the message - no one need lose. God wants only to build up people, not to tear them down. The dream was a warning which became a reality, but more significantly, Daniel's appeal to repentance and restoration was the greater reality.

And here is the deepest message of all - God is not like the tyrants of the world. He is more powerful, he is eternal, just and loving. He only ever wants the best for his creation, and will do all he can to give that best. If he had been like Nebuchadnezzar, the king would have remained an animal forever. But God is not like Nebuchadnezzar - he longed for the king to return and be blessed.

This is a God worth giving our lives to.

## **Daniel Chapter 5**

Nebuchadnezzar has passed from the scene, and we are now in the reign of Belshazzar, last king of Babylon.

### **V.1**

For Belshazzar, these are difficult days. The Persian Empire has just beaten his forces, and they are camped outside the city. (We read this in the “Nabonidus Chronicles”) The future looks very uncertain.

### **V.2-4**

Belshazzar has a very weak grasp of history. If he had known better, he would have known that those who challenge and insult the God of Israel could only expect a difficult time. But he had no sense of history, or he was just arrogant, and/or drunk. So he had the holy vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem brought in, and used them as he, and the assembly, praised other false gods. What was he up to as he committed this blasphemy? He was singing the age old tune – the gods of Babylon were greater than all other gods. Nebuchadnezzar had felt the same about his golden statue.

### **V.5-6**

Now a very strange thing happened - a hand appeared and began to write on the wall. (From this we get the English expression “The writing is on the wall”, which usually indicates some cataclysmic event.)

### **V.7-9**

As in previous stories in Daniel, the local wise men appear unequal to the task of interpretation. The result of their failure was that the king became even more afraid. He was right to be so - he had exalted himself and the gods of Babylon, but now found himself, spiritually, out of his depth.

### **V.10-12**

We, the readers, know exactly who he needs, but Daniel appears to have fallen out of favour. Belshazzar hasn't heard of him, but fortunately someone remembered. The Queen gives Daniel a glowing testimonial – one we have heard

before. **“The spirit of the holy gods is in him.” “He has insight and intelligence and wisdom.” “He has a keen mind and knowledge and understanding.” “He has the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems.”** Not a bad c.v. and shows again the quality of this humble servant of the Lord.

### **V.13-16**

Daniel is brought in, and asked if he can solve the riddle. If he can, he can have a high post in the kingdom. The Daniel we know would not obey because of such an enticement. He responds to God and to God alone. He is an island of purity in a sea of paganism, and as we know he will be fearless in speaking God’s truth. But what will he say?

### **V.17-24**

As we expected, he is off to a very bunt start –**“ keep your gifts for yourself!”** Then it’s a history lesson about the pride of Nebuchadnezzar, and its consequences. Unlike Belshazzar, we are familiar with this story. Then the challenge **“But you, his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself.” “You have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven.”** It’s a bit like Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. Both kings set themselves up against God, and both were given a warning and a chance to repent.

### **V.25-28**

At last we are going to see what the hand had written:-

**“Mene,mene,Tekel, Parsin”**

**“Mene”** mean that Belshazzar had made a bad mistake when he took on the God of heaven. For it is God who holds the days of men in his hand, and Belshazzar’s have just run out!

**“Tekel”** Belshazzar has been weighed in the balance and found wanting as a leader of his people.

**“Parsin”** mean that the inevitable is going to happen. The Persians, who were at the gate, are going to take the Kingdom of Babylon.

### **V.29-31**

Two consequences flow from the reading of the words. Daniel gets promoted and Belshazzar gets killed and the Persians take over.

Message – don't play around with God. Do we? We know so much more about God because of Jesus. But when he calls do we answer, or do we ignore him, prevaricate, place his call as secondary? Is this any worse than Belshazzar? The Lord needs faithful people, who will obey him as he deserves to be obeyed.

## Daniel Chapter 6

In this chapter, Belshazzar is no more, and Darius the Mede is now King. Looks easy enough doesn't it - Babylon falls to the Persians and their king takes over. But it's not as simple as that - we don't know who Darius the Mede was, as there appears to be no record of him as such. We won't go into all this here, except to suggest that the name "Darius" was another appellation of Cyrus, of whom we know a great deal.

### V.1-3

Darius appoints an administrative staff, and Daniel is one of the top three of them – the position he was given originally by Belshazzar. Daniel's integrity brings him to the top again and again - with Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and now Darius. If Daniel has continuity in his integrity, so, as we will see, he has a continuity of enemies, who want to destroy him.

### V.4-9

Daniel's enemies tried to find some grounds for charges against him. Like Belshazzar, they should have learnt from history - Daniel was a man who had **"no corruption in him"**. ( v4) So they began to look for something in his Jewish faith which they could use against him. We have seen this kind of behaviour many times in our own day. Being a Hutu, a Serb, a Roma, a black, a white - all have been used as reasons for attack and destruction. From age to age the unreformed human spirit does not change.

So they came up with a religious plan – the King should issue a decree that everyone would worship him, and anyone who does not should be thrown into the Lion's den. This sounds very much like the same challenge to the first Christians - worship the Emperor or be destroyed. ( See the Martyrdom of Polycarp, bishop of Smerna 150-160 C.E.)

Interesting to see that, for all the years of service in a pagan environment, Daniel was still a monotheist, and his religion was publically known - he made no attempt to hide who he was and in whom he trusted.

### **V.10**

Daniel's response is exactly what we would have expected. He went to his room, and put his trust in God. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would have approved!

### **V.11-15**

Daniel's enemies knew exactly what Daniel would do. They were watching, and as soon as they saw Daniel praying to "another god" they reported the offence to the King. Darius was "**greatly distressed.**" Why? Perhaps he saw now that he had been tricked into this la by jealous officials, or perhaps he understood the effectiveness of Daniel's work. Either way, he tries to find an excuse for delivering Daniel - it's always possible that he genuinely liked him. But "the laws of the Medes and Persians" could not be changed. (Interesting that it is the laws of the Medes and Persians - evidence that in fact these two were one kingdom, and not two separate ones.)

### **V.16-18**

So Daniel is consigned to the Lion's den. He was sealed in, (see the sealing of the tomb of Jesus. Matt.27:64) so that no escape was possible. The king is very upset by all this, and full of fear. He had a dull evening, and could not sleep - a big contrast to Daniel, who, as we shall see, had a good night.

### **V.19-23**

Morning breaks, and the king had only one question in mind "**has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?**" Darius had clearly not heard of the event at Nebuchadnezzar's statue. The answer was unequivocal. God has rescued an innocent man.

Before we shout "alleluia", let's be careful. God always vindicates his servants, but this vindication is not always seen on earth. Some of those in Hebrews 11 were rescued, and some were not, but all were vindicated. The book of Daniel is about total faith, and this can place us in mortal danger from which, on occasions

and for his greater plan, we are not delivered. But we are always able to say, **“The God we serve is able to save us..and he will rescue us from your hand O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know O king that we will not serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up.”**

Anyway, on this occasion, Daniel is delivered back into the physical realm, and the king is overjoyed. Daniel is released from the cave, and found to be completely unharmed.

### **V.24-28**

Previously, Daniel had rescued his enemies, by interpreting the King’s dream. This time there is no such deliverance. The enemies of the Lord’s man have finally reached the end of their line, and they are destroyed by the very lions who were held back by the Lord.

Then Darius issues a decree, exalting the God of Israel, just as Nebuchadnezzar did, and Belshazzar didn’t. Daniel passes from the scene of world history with his reputation, which he has held onto through many decades, intact and vindicated.

So we have reached the end of the first part of Daniel’s book, and now we are in a position to sum it up. The message is very simple – God reigns. In whatever circumstance, and whatever we face, God reigns. We are to lift up our eyes, and put our trust in God. He will not fail us. Our response to this is equally simple - total faith.