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Daniel 1:1–21



IN 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.

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.

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."

¹¹Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal

food. ¹⁶So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Original Meaning

THE FIRST CHAPTER of the book of Daniel is a distinct unit. It begins and ends with a chronological marker that identifies the beginning and end of Daniel's career ("the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim" [v. 1] and "the first year of King Cyrus" [v. 21]). In terms of our dating system, this places Daniel's career from 605 to 539 B.C.¹

Daniel 1 provides an introduction for the whole book, plunging us quickly into the action and introducing the main characters of the book. It also illustrates the overarching theme of the book: In spite of present appearances, God is in control. In keeping with the court narratives in chapters 1–6, the first chapter narrates an episode from the experience of Daniel and his three friends that models another important lesson: Though in exile, God gives his people the ability to prosper as well as to be faithful. This chapter, and the book as a whole, must have served as a tremendous encouragement to the faith of those devout exiles who felt as if their whole world had come crashing down on their heads.

This first chapter has the following outline: (1) Jehoiakim delivered into Nebuchadnezzar's hand (1:1–2); (2) training for service (1:3–7); (3) avoiding defilement (1:8–16); (4) success given to Daniel and his friends (1:17–20); and (5) the extent of Daniel's ministry (1:21).

1. See discussion at verse 21 for the argument that Daniel's career actually stretched beyond Cyrus's first year.

Jehoiakim Delivered into Nebuchadnezzar's Hand (1:1–2)

THE NARRATOR IMMERSSES us immediately into the action. Nebuchadnezzar² has moved against Jerusalem. As Fewell has pointed out, our story begins at the end of another story.³ The forces that brought Nebuchadnezzar (or at least his army) to Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoiakim are hinted at elsewhere (cf. 2 Chron. 36:5–7⁴); here we are simply informed that he moved against Jerusalem, resulting in the deportation of the heroes of our book.

Before recounting the events that led up to Daniel 1:1, we must acknowledge the fact that many scholars (those who argue that Daniel 1 is written much later than the sixth century B.C.) believe that Daniel 1:1–2 is a confused historical memory,⁵ based on the author's misreading of 2 Chronicles 36:6–7 in connection with 2 Kings 24:1. On this basis, Hartman and DiLella deny that Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem in 605 B.C., the date implied by our text. In addition, they argue that Nebuchadnezzar did not even become king of Babylon until the next year.⁶ A surface reading of Jeremiah 25:1 ("the word came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, which was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon") seems to imply that Nebuchadnezzar did not even become king until Jehoiakim's fourth year. These scholars also point out that the Babylonian Chronicle, our main native source of information for this time period, does not mention Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem.

There are at least two possible harmonizations that permit us to accept Daniel 1:1–2 as an accurate historical memory. First, Daniel 1:1 may well refer to Nebuchadnezzar as king in an anticipatory sense. After all, it is soon after Daniel's report of a siege of Jerusalem that Nabopolassar's death would bring Nebuchadnezzar to the throne. No one doubts, based on Babylonian records

2. Goldingay's attempt (*Daniel*, 4), based on studies by Van Selms, to connect the Hebrew spelling of the Babylonian king's Akkadian name [*Nabu-kudurri-usur* (Nabu protects the first-born/boundary stone)] with an insulting etymology [*Nabu-kudanu-usur* ("Nabu protects the mule")] strikes me as overly speculative.

3. D. N. Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty: A Story of Stories in Daniel 1–6* (JSOTSup 72; Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 34.

4. Second Kings 24:1–4 narrates a later conflict between Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim. After initially yielding to the Babylonians (2 Chron. 36:6–7; Dan. 1:1–3), Jehoiakim rebelled against them three years later. Before Nebuchadnezzar could respond, Jehoiakim died, leaving his young son, Jehoiachin, on the throne, to face the onslaught, being exiled himself in 598 B.C.

5. J. A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 113, states "there is no historical corroboration of such an event in the third year of Jehoiakim."

6. See L. F. Hartman and A. A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 48.

themselves, Nebuchadnezzar's presence as crown prince and field commander of the Babylonian army in their wars against Egypt in the area of Syria-Palestine in the years before 605 B.C.

We can also harmonize the data by reminding ourselves, at the instigation of the well-known Assyriologist D. J. Wiseman, that there were two systems of dating current in the ancient Near Eastern world, both of which can be found in the Old Testament.⁷ The above passages may be harmonized by assuming that Jeremiah utilized the Judaeen method of chronological reckoning, which counts the first year of a king's reign as the first year, and that Daniel used the Babylonian system, which counts the first year as an "accession year." Hasel helpfully diagrammed the results:⁸

Chronology of Kings in Jeremiah and Daniel

Accession-year method	Accession year	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	Daniel 1:1
Non-accession-year method	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year	Jeremiah 25:1, 9; 46:2

It is true that the Babylonian Chronicle provides ambiguous evidence in the argument for and against a Babylonian assault against Jerusalem in the period 605/604 B.C. Wiseman in 1965 argued that the Babylonian Chronicle fails to mention the siege of Jerusalem because it is preoccupied with "the major defeat of the Egyptians," but he goes on to say that "a successful incursion into Judah by the Babylonian army group which returned from the Egyptian border could be included in the claim that at that time Nebuchadnezzar conquered 'all Hatti.'"⁹

However, in 1985¹⁰ he agreed with Grayson¹¹ that the relevant line of the Chronicles (BM 21946, 8) should be read as referring to Hamath and not Hatti. J. J. Collins, then, took this as decisive evidence that the Daniel account is not accurate; there was no deportation of any size this early.¹² However, he fails to report, as Wiseman goes on to say, that the next section of the Chronicle does report activity in the area of Hatti. Wiseman further reminds us that

7. D. J. Wiseman, et al., *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London: Tyndale, 1965), 16–18.

8. G. F. Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 47–49.

9. Wiseman, *Notes on Some Problems*, 18.

10. D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 17.

11. A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1975), 99.

12. J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 131.

the phrase used in Daniel 1:1 does not necessarily mean that a formal military siege was laid against Jerusalem; it could mean no more, he says, than to "show hostility." Thus, Wiseman demonstrates how the biblical reference to the third year of Jehoiakim "could be a justifiable dating if this covered the twelve months ending in 604 B.C.,"¹³ which view he indeed holds.

In spite of the difficulties, therefore, we understand Daniel 1:1–2 as an accurate memory and will now place it within the broader historical landscape as we can reconstruct it from other biblical texts as well as ancient Near Eastern texts, particularly the Babylonian Chronicle.¹⁴

In 609 B.C. King Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar's father, attacked Haran, and this signaled a period of time when Babylon's efforts were directed toward Syria-Palestine with an eye focused on Egypt, who was an ally of the remnants of the Assyrians. Battles with Egyptian and Syrian armies continued in the next few years.

In 605 Nebuchadnezzar was now the head of the army in Syria. He defeated the Egyptians at Carchemish, a victory that opened the rest of Syria and Palestine to the Babylonian forces.¹⁵ The Babylonian Chronicle at this point mentions in a general way that Nebuchadnezzar found success in his incursions into Syria-Palestine, and it is here that we understand that he besieged Jerusalem and compelled Jehoiakim to become an unwilling vassal. Debate surrounds 2 Chronicles 36:4–8 as to whether Jehoiakim himself was temporarily deported to Babylon or whether he was only threatened with deportation. In either case, we agree with Dillard that this deportation should be "associated with the deportation of Daniel and his friends along with articles from the temple in Jehoiakim's third year after Nebuchadnezzar defeated Neco at Carchemish" (cf. Jer. 46:2).¹⁶

The book of Daniel, of course, does not argue for the historical event; it narrates it. Indeed, even more, it intends to interpret the event for us. Human observation would lead to a very different understanding than that provided to us by the narrator of this book. On one level, it seems clear: Nebuchadnezzar, the leader of a powerful army, cowed Jerusalem, and, in a token of his dominance, took away some of the temple vessels and, as we will find out in the next section, a few of the noble youth. To the human eye, it appeared that Nebuchadnezzar had power; Judah did not.

13. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar*, 22.

14. See also the convenient summary of the period provided by T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), 348–49, though he passes over a siege of Jerusalem in 605, which may indicate that he does not accept Daniel 1:1–2 as reflecting historical reality.

15. Also in 605 B.C. Nabopolassar died, causing Nebuchadnezzar to quickly return to Babylon to secure the throne.

16. R. B. Dillard, *2 Chronicles* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 299.

The narrator rips away the curtain and informs his readers of the reality behind the appearance. He does so simply by saying that “the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] hand.” Nebuchadnezzar’s might, though considerable, was not the reason why Jerusalem fell under his influence; it was the result of the will and action of God himself. This subtle phrase introduces a major theme of the book, the conflict between overweening human power and the power of God. A major concern of the book is to reinforce the belief that the sovereignty of God far surpasses the power of even the most mighty of human rulers. This theme is supported here by the use of the word “Lord” (*’adonai*) rather than “LORD” (*yhwh*) to refer to God. The former emphasizes God’s ownership, his control.

It is a sign that Nebuchadnezzar’s victory over Jerusalem is only the occasion for the following story that the narrator does not here even hint at the reasons why God moved against his own people in this way. As we will see later, the prayer in chapter 9 will show that Daniel himself agreed with other biblical authors (cf. the book of Kings) that the disaster took place because of the sin of the people. There he confesses on behalf of the people that they have rebelled against God and his commandments. But here again, Nebuchadnezzar’s success is reported as the occasion that brought Daniel and his three friends to the Babylonian court.

Even before telling us about the human booty, however, the narrator mentions that Nebuchadnezzar took “some of the articles from the temple of God” and placed them in the temple of his god in Babylonia.¹⁷ The specific identity of these “articles” is left unspecified.¹⁸ In Exodus, the word “article” (*keli*) is a general term used to designate smaller objects used to support the cultic worship in the tabernacle (Ex. 27:19; 30:27; 31:8). In the book of Kings, we occasionally hear of the “articles,” as when Asa dedicated certain gold and silver articles to temple service (1 Kings 15:15), or, in an interesting parallel to our story, when Jehoash, king of Israel, attacked Amaziah, king of Judah, robbed the temple of the “articles,” and carried them back to Samaria (2 Kings 14:14). Second Chronicles 4:16 may give us an idea of the

17. The Hebrew text has Shinar, see NIV footnote. According to R. Zadok, “The Origin of the Name Shinar,” *ZA* 74 (1984): 240–44, Shinar is an anachronistic reference to Babylonia. Goldingay (*Daniel*, 15), on the basis of other Old Testament usage (see particularly Genesis 11:1–9), argues that the term “suggests a place of false religion, self-will, and self-aggrandizement.”

18. In an interesting article, P. R. Ackroyd, “The Temple Vessels—A Continuity Theme,” in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 166–79, describes the theological theme centered on the temple articles. To Ackroyd the text is not historical (esp. the reference in Dan. 1:2, cf. p. 180), but rather the removal and the restoration of the temple articles describes the continuity and discontinuity of Israel’s relationship with God disrupted by the catastrophe of the Exile.

specific items included in the word *keli* when it lists “the pots, shovels, meat forks and all related articles.” Of course, in Daniel 5 we also learn that these articles included “goblets,” since Belshazzar seriously offends the Lord by using these for his banquet. Ezra 1:9–11 inventories the articles at the time of their return in consequence of Cyrus’s decree, though some of these may have come from later sacks of the temple.¹⁹

In particular, our present passage anticipates the story in Daniel 5. Once again, from a human perspective, the plundering of the temple of the Lord, even if at this time only “some of the articles” were taken and placed in the Babylonian temple, could be seen as a great victory not only over Israel, but also over Yahweh himself. This act reflects a common ancient Near Eastern practice. A victorious army plundered the temple of the vanquished nation and placed the symbols of the defeated god in their own temple. An analogy is the placement of the ark in the temple of Dagon after the Philistines defeated the Israelites in battle during the youth of Samuel (1 Sam. 4–5). To the Philistines it appeared that Dagon had soundly whipped Yahweh, but subsequent events quickly changed their minds. The reality of the situation will take much longer to develop in Babylon, but the next time we see these “articles” in the hands of drunken Babylonians will be on the eve of their destruction (see comments in Dan. 5).

Training for Service (1:3–7)

BEGINNING WITH VERSE 3, the narrative focus begins to narrow. Nebuchadnezzar orders Ashpenaz,²⁰ one of his high officials, to begin the training process for the cream of the crop among the exiled youth.

We might well ask why Nebuchadnezzar would bother with the exiled youth. To answer this question we need to remember that at this time Nebuchadnezzar was trying to control Judah without actually taking it over. He has placed his puppet, Zedekiah, on the throne. His purpose with Daniel and the others was to train them in Babylonian ways for political and propaganda purposes. These members of the elite classes would become enamored with Babylonian ways and customs and either return to positions of influence at home or stay in Babylon in important positions, perhaps even serving as quasi-hostages. We can see analogies at other times in ancient Near Eastern history.²¹

19. See 2 Kings 24:13; 25:13–17; Jer. 52:17–23.

20. Most commentators (see A. Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1979], 21) recognize the Old Persian word for “inn” in his name, thus associating his name with his work of providing for the dining and lodging of the “school of the exiles.” See also, Hartman and DiLella, *The Book of Daniel*, 129.

21. For instance, Rome had the practice of taking the children of other close relatives of client states and holding them “hostage.” This practice was not punishment as much as

Jon Berquist reminds us that Nebuchadnezzar's policy was fueled by other pragmatic considerations as well. The expanding empire required an expanding bureaucracy, which could not be met by the expertise of the native population. So the elite of subdued nations were pressed into service in the interest of Babylonian empire building.²²

We refer to Daniel, his three friends, and the others implied²³ by the passage as members of the elite class of Judah for good reasons. In verse 3, for instance, they are referred to as "some . . . from the royal family and the nobility." Rabbinic tradition associates this verse with Isaiah 39:7 and asserts that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were descendants of King Hezekiah.²⁴ Even if not direct descendants of the king, they are nobly born in Judah.

But the qualifications for admission go well beyond right of birth. The king specified physical as well as intellectual qualities. That they were to be "young men" (*y^lladim*), though of imprecise age designation,²⁵ makes it hard to believe that they were over twenty and may have been much younger.²⁶

Furthermore, candidates for admission to the royal school were to have impeccable physical qualifications: "without any physical defect" as well as "handsome." The latter quality is easy to understand, though the standards of masculine beauty were possibly different. We may get a clue of what those standards are when we look at the artwork of ancient Mesopotamia²⁷ and note the well-muscled, full-bearded, luxuriantly curled hair of the warriors and

security against rebellion. As these hostages lived in Rome, a high-ranking Roman family became their patron and they became acclimated to Roman ways, with the idea that they would be friends of Rome when they returned to their native lands. In the context of Daniel 11, we will note how this was also the experience of Antiochus IV and Demetrius.

22. J. L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 15–16. Berquist differentiates these urban exiles who worked in the government bureaucracy from the rural exiles, who helped in food supply.

23. Verse 6 describes Daniel and his three friends as "some" among the exiles chosen for training. We hear nothing of the others; the text focuses only on Daniel and his three friends.

24. J. Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel: A Study of Comparative Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible* (CBQMS 7; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1978), 67–68.

25. Cf. V. P. Hamilton, "ילד," *NIDOTTE*, 2:457–58.

26. This is true especially in the light of the fact that Daniel lives through the entire exilic period. Many commentators cite Greek evidence that Persian education began in the early teens. L. J. Wood (*A Commentary on Daniel* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], 33), for example, states: "Plato (*Alcibiades* 1.121) says that the education of youths in Persia began at fourteen years, and Xenophon (*Cyropaedia*, I.2) speaks of the seventeenth year as the completion"; see also J. A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1927), 122. Of course, this Persian evidence, if reliable, is of uncertain relevance to Babylon decades earlier.

27. Cf. J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).