

DANIEL

Week 4, chapter 1 continued

We found out last time that Daniel was deported to Babylon in 605 B.C., a consequence of the first attack ordered by Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem. This was in response to King Jehoiakim of Judah breaking his 3 year old agreement to be a tribute-paying vassal to Babylon.

Jerusalem was not badly damaged, although the Temple was looted for a number of its valuable gold and silver ritual vessels. Those items were replaceable; but what was not so easily replaced was the brain-power that was drained from the ruling class and sent to Babylon to serve the Babylonian royal court.

Daniel and his cohorts were not made slaves, per se. They indeed were taken against their will, but they were treated with dignity and respect and offered prestigious positions in the Babylonian government. Some of this had to do with the fact that they were Judean nobility and some might have even been part of the royal family, but not so close as to be eligible to rule over Judah.

While there were more than the 4 youths taken to Babylon, our story focuses only on these four and the primary interest is on one in particular: Daniel. Chapter 1 verse 4 explains that they were especially chosen for their intelligence, their education, their noble bearing and their good looks. The first thing that happened to them was that they were sent to school to learn the ways and language of the Babylonians. They were turned over to a group called the *Kasdim*, or in English the Chaldeans, to be taught.

The term Chaldeans has always presented a bit of a problem for bible interpreters as there is not a great deal known about them, and it seems that the term Chaldeans meant slightly different things in different eras. Chaldeans first appear in Assyrian records around the 9th century B.C., and it referring to a territory located south of the city of Babylon. The people of this territory seemed to gain more and more influence in the area until by the time of Nebuchadnezzar it appears that the term Chaldean referred to an elite class of people; intellectuals, those especially versed in language, arts, magic and astrology. To use the New Testament description for them, they were "wise men".

While the general language of the region was Aramaic, it seems nearly certain that the elite of the Chaldeans spoke Akkadian. We see this phenomenon in many Middle Eastern cultures where the language of the common folks is different from the language of the most learned in their society. In Yeshua's day, Aramaic was the language of the bulk of the common Hebrew working class, while the most worldly Jews spoke Greek, and the priests and Levites and Jewish aristocrats conversed mainly in Hebrew. But it is not as though these different segments of society couldn't communicate. In point of fact nearly everyone was multi-lingual to one degree or another and all of these languages operated simultaneously, side by side.

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So when Daniel and his comrades were sent to the Chaldean school, they would have learned both Akkadian and Aramaic. The languages had similarities and both used cuneiform alphabets. But there was another point to sending them to school: they were to learn the ways of the Babylonians including about their gods, their religion, and their magic.

Let's pick up at verse 5, and the matter involving food.

RE-READ DANIEL 1:5 – end

Verse 5 explains that these Jewish youth were to be fed from the Kings table. This did not mean that they dined with King Nebuchadnezzar; rather it means that they ate food from the royal pantry, which was the best of the best food in the land. It means that the food was provided for them, prepared, and served to them as would be served to an aristocrat. And we're told that the period of their education was to be for three years. Assyriologists are convinced that this mention of 3 years of education indicates a form of organized institutional higher education, and that essentially a student got a 3 year degree upon graduation. So this wasn't some special arrangement only for these Jewish immigrants. We read of the same thing concerning an education system in later Persian documents. Naturally, only the most privileged and noble were given access to such a valuable education.

Verses 6 and 7 give us the names of these Jewish youths and then we're told that the man in charge of them assigned them new names. Let's get the preliminaries out of the way by explaining the meaning of their Hebrew names. **Daniel** means (El) God has judged. **Hananyah** means Yah (or God) is gracious. **Mishael** means who is as God is? And finally **Azaryah** means God has helped. Notice how each one of these Hebrew names invokes their Hebrew God in some way.

It was the prerogative and a standard practice of conquering kings to change the names of their vassal kings and those who they captured and used near them in the royal court. The idea was partly that their old life and status had terminated, and so with a new life and status came a new name to symbolize it. **Daniel's** new name was Beltshazzar. There's no consensus on its meaning. Some scholars believe it comes directly from an Akkadian phrase that means "protect his life". Others think that because the god Bel was an important god of the Babylonians, and that it might have intended to make some connection that way.

Hananyah's new name was Shadrakh, and I found so many different suppositions on the meaning of his name that frankly it's not worth discussing.

Mishael's new name was Meshack, which is probably from an Akkadian word that means "I am slighted".

And finally **Azaryah's** name was changed to Aved-Nego. Scholarly consensus here is that Nego is a copyist error and it should have been Nebo; however since all translations from one language to another depend on how a word sounds when spoken, then since in Aramaic Nego and Nebo are so

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similar that it is not so much an error as just another way of vocalizing the same word. Nebo was a high Babylonian deity. If the consensus is correct then it probably means “servant of Nebo”, which makes sense.

But now as we get to verse 8, the deeper reason for the name changes begins to reveal itself (which is why we took a moment to see what these new Babylonian names might have meant). We were told earlier that the king ordered that these Jewish youth be fed from the king’s own food supply. But Daniel decided he could not accept this because it would have meant defiling himself. Why? Because the food being offered would not have been compatible with Torah law; it would not have been ritually clean.

So here we see Daniel emerge as the leader of the group as he steps forward to establish that he will not give up his holiness to comply even with the orders of a king. No doubt Daniel sees this as a divine test of his faithfulness. The issue was not necessarily that the preparation of the food would not have met Levitical standards as it was that the meat would have been unclean due to at least a portion of it having been sacrificed to the Babylonian idols (this was the common practice).

Let me pause for a brief detour to explain a common misconception about the Laws of Kashrut (the Torah dietary rules) that even much of the Jewish community is unaware. There are two distinct sets of Torah laws that deal with food. One set deals with what is considered permissible. And then another set deals with the proper handling of the permissible foods. The first set is about defining what is to be considered as food, and the 2nd set then explains what can contaminate the otherwise permissible foods, thereby rendering them unclean and therefore ritually inedible. Technically the terms clean and unclean have nothing to do with listing which items can be considered as food; that falls under the classification of permissible and prohibited. Rather clean and unclean are ONLY about the handling of food that if done improperly can render a perfectly permissible food as ritually unclean.

So (and this is key for understanding the issue of food especially in the New Testament), from Leviticus onward (after the food laws are given to Moses) the term food is only referring to permissible food. Because if something otherwise edible is prohibited, it is not food. Our modern Western minds think about categorizing food items as more edible and inedible. That is, things that will not harm us and may supply some level of nutrition are called edible; things that would cause us to be harmed or even die if we ingest them are called inedible. Thus while many insects, worms, reptiles, and some plants that taste disgusting are indeed edible by humans (from a purely scientific medical standpoint), from a biblical standpoint they do not qualify as food and humans (especially redeemed humans) ought not to eat them.

So remembering that from Genesis to Revelation the bible is a Hebrew document created in the context of a Hebrew culture, then understand that unless the biblical context specifically calls for a different definition, when God or a Hebrew uses the term “food” it is only referring to permissible food according to the list given in the Law of Moses. Anything outside that list is not food and is not referred to as food. Thus when we encounter a food issue in Old or New Testaments this in mind. Since this matter is especially problematic for Christians, consider this example:

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1Cor. 8:4-7 CJB

4 So, as for eating food sacrificed to idols, we "know" that, as you say, "An idol has no real existence in the world, and there is only one God."

5 For even if there are so-called "gods," either in heaven or on earth- as in fact there are "gods" and "lords" galore-

6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and one Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, through whom were created all things and through whom we have our being.

7 But not everyone has this knowledge. Moreover, some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat food which has been sacrificed to them, they think of it as really affected by the idol; and their consciences, being weak, are thus defiled.

So this passage has a number of issues involved. First is the use of the term "food". And food is defined as something that God has said in the Law of Moses is permissible to eat. But because in this case because the food was sacrificed to idols, then this food becomes ritually unclean. So, for instance, this passage by no means is indicating sacrificing a pig, or a horse, or something that is prohibited and thus is fundamentally NOT FOOD.

And just so we don't leave this passage hanging, Paul goes on to explain that since idols have ALWAYS been nothings (since there are no such things in reality as other gods), then it is certainly NOT that this silly idol has somehow caused the molecular structure of the meat to literally change or is it contaminated as though it was dropped in a mud puddle. So that is not why this food becomes unclean. Thus because the people in question don't have the knowledge of the God of Israel, the Law of Moses and the Torah (we're no doubt speaking of gentiles here), and the Torah makes it clear that it is NOT any inherent physical aspect of an edible item that is at the root of God's food choices (rather it is simply the Lord's sovereign decision), the conclusion is that to NOT eat food sacrificed to idols is strictly a matter of obedience and faith to the God of Israel (it is not an issue of a magical spell cast over the meat or some physical transformation of the meat). Thus these gentiles in this NT passage, who sacrifice their meat to idols before eating it, really believe that the idols have a physical tangible effect on that meat. So for them it's not that their food somehow becomes physically defiled (since these idols have no power anyway), rather it is that their consciences become defiled (ritually unclean before God) because their intent is wrong. The issues of clean and unclean, permitted and prohibited, are spiritual issues; they are merely played out in a physical world.

So armed with that understanding we come back to Daniel and see that for Daniel this problem he had with eating the king's food was an issue of proper obedience to the Torah Law of not eating food that has been ritually defiled (because from a physical standpoint it is otherwise perfectly edible and nutritious). So, in what is described as a humble attitude showing respect, Daniel asks if he might be excused from eating the king's food so that he is not ritually defiled. Interestingly the chief officer, a Babylonian, was not insulted by this and was actually quite sympathetic. But he was also afraid that if Daniel didn't partake of the food so graciously allotted to him by the king that

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he'd get in trouble. And the main proof to the king as to whether the youths were getting the proper food was how they looked.

So Daniel turns to a subordinate of **Ashp'naz**, the chief eunuch, and asks him to just try a relatively short experiment to prove that the king would be none the wiser if Daniel was granted his request, because outwardly they'd look just fine. And by the way, although the CJB says that it was the guard whom Daniel spoke to, the Hebrew word is **Melzar** and very likely this is a proper name and doesn't just have a generic meaning like guard or steward. That is, Daniel spoke to a fellow named **Melzar** and asked him if they could eat differently. So the bargain was that Daniel and his 3 friends would only eat vegetables (which except under the most radical circumstances don't get defiled), and drink only water. Why can't they drink the king's wine? Wine is kosher. No one really has a provable answer except that perhaps the wine used by the Babylonian royalty was a much higher alcohol content than Hebrew table wine; and wine with too high of an alcohol content is called old wine (or **shekar**), and it is fermented with the express purpose to get you drunk as quickly as possible. But, that is speculation and opinion.

The testing period was to be for 10 days, and then **Melzar** could determine if the Jewish youths looked OK so he wouldn't get in trouble. And of course, at the end of 10 days the young men looked better than the others who ate the king's food and drank his wine. So **Melzar** agreed to continue with the dietary program. A point I'd like to make here is this: from a nutrition or food safety aspect there wasn't a thing in the world wrong with the food that the king provided for the Jewish youth. It was first rate and no doubt was permissible under Torah Law. And, for you vegetarians don't think that this vegan diet we see Daniel and his buddies eating was somehow causing them to look better. Rather, this is a spiritual issue. I've said over and over again: the Laws of Moses aren't, and have never been, salvation issues. The Laws of Moses didn't redeem Israel to start with, and (with some exceptions) they didn't maintain Israel's redemption when obeyed. And for Believers, there is only 1 thing that redeems us: trust in our Lord Yeshua. And scrupulously obeying God's commandments is not the determining factor (with some exceptions) in maintaining our membership in the Kingdom of God. Daniel and his friends would not have become un-redeemed had they eaten the king's defiled food. But, they would have become ritually unclean. The issue I'm highlighting here is a determination to be obedient to the Lord's commandments as a proper response to God's free gift of redemption and relationship. However if one's determination is to intentionally and habitually trespass against God's commandments, this may indicate a fundamental lack of trust or faith in God. And a lack of faith or trust indeed puts one's redemption in doubt since trust and faith are the core requirements for redemption.

Daniel and his friends knew God's laws well. But now that they were up in Babylon, would they still strive to obey those dietary laws even in a foreign place under challenging circumstances? Would they be a good witness for Yehoveh in a pagan place by steadfastly remaining obedient, or would they go along with the crowd and employ the motto "when in Rome..."? Daniel passed the divine test; the Lord favored Daniel and his 3 friends not only with sustained health on such a limited diet, but they actually fared BETTER than those who ate the full menu. This was not a natural result of eating only vegetables and water; it was a supernatural blessing by God. And it no doubt made a favorable impression on both **Melzar** and his boss **Ashp'naz**.

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Now if I can ask for your full attention. It is important to understand that the bottom line purpose of Nebuchadnezzar taking these Jewish youths from Judah and offering them prestigious positions in his government; giving them new Babylonian names and sending them to a 3 year program of the best higher education available; and of offering only the best Babylonian foods from the king's own table, was to fundamentally change **Daniel, Hananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah's** identities. They were brought to him as intelligent faithful Jews and he wanted them to become loyal useful Babylonians. The intent was to separate them from their heritage, their nation, and their faith. The goal was to have them, in time, think differently than when they had first arrived. And the primary ingredients needed to facilitate this new identity were: location, name, education and diet.

And notice that of these 4 ingredients on the path to identity change the one given the most attention in this story was diet. This is not by accident. As I try to remind gentile Christians whenever the opportunity arises: when Adam and Even were created, they had no known rules given to them save for one. They essentially had a Torah that consisted of but ONE commandment. Do you recall what that one commandment was?

Gen 2:15-17 CJB

¹⁵ *ADONAI, God, took the person and put him in the garden of 'Eden to cultivate and care for it.*

¹⁶ *ADONAI, God, gave the person this order: "You may freely eat from every tree in the garden*

¹⁷ *except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You are not to eat from it, because on the day that you eat from it, it will become certain that you will die."*

In a pristine world that was perfect and free of sin, there was given to the first couple a divine commandment that (as illogical as it might seem to our modern scientific, Systematic Theology based Christianity) was about diet. Yes, the very first law ever given to mankind (long before there was an Abraham, Isaac, or Israel) was about food. They could eat anything they chose in the garden without restriction....except.....for one particular fruit from one particular tree. The result of eating that fruit, as both Jews and Christians fully agree and accept, was **not** that Adam and Eve were poisoned. The fruit was obviously not only edible but the bible says it was delicious. The result of breaking that dietary law was the emergence of sin itself. And the result of sin is death; physical and spiritual death. Obedience to God and the resultant spiritual blessing; or disobedience to God and the resultant spiritual curse is the God-principle being demonstrated with Adam and Even, and with the Kosher dietary laws of the Torah. For those who have ears, I pray you hear. I pray you **shema**.

Verse 17 of Daniel chapter 1 continues that these 4 boys had been given tremendous spiritual gifts. However a division is drawn and an emphasis is created. Daniel, unlike his 3 friends (and apparently unlike any of the other unnamed Jewish youth taken to Babylon) was given the gifts of understanding dreams and visions. And let's be clear about what is meant about the type of

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learning and wisdom that all 4 were given special gifts for: it was of ANY type. These boys would have had great ability to learn and digest the Babylonian languages, magic arts, god system, etc. But with wisdom they could also discern what was true and what was false. All of these boys would become expert in the ways of the Babylonians and Chaldeans, but that doesn't mean that they subscribed to their efficacy or societal morality. Daniel, especially, would rise in knowledge of the Babylonian system above even the best of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian brain trust. And this isn't the first time we've heard of such a thing.

Acts 7:22 CJB

22 *So Moshe was trained in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and became both a powerful speaker and a man of action.*

But in the end, this knowledge was used by Moses and soon by Daniel for a Godly purpose as directed by God. Or, as C.F. Keil so eloquently put it: such acquisition of heathen knowledge was arranged, "so as to put to shame the wisdom of this world by the hidden wisdom of God".

Thus after the 3 years of training, **Ashp'naz** presented Daniel and his 3 comrades to King Nebuchadnezzar. The King carefully interviewed them and was so impressed by what he saw and heard that among all of the Jewish youths he had commandeered and had trained in Babylonian ways, these 4 were superior in every manner. No doubt the king gave them difficult problems to solve and ponder and their acute degree of discernment in these matters set them apart from all others.

This chapter ends with the notice that Daniel continued until the first year of King Koresh. I told you I'd point out places the bible scholars of the bible criticism school latch onto as evidence that Daniel is a fraud, and this is one of them.

King Koresh is the Persian King Cyrus. So we have Daniel serving the Babylonian kings as long as Babylon remained the regional power, and then serving the Persian Kings when they took over the Babylonian Empire. However in Daniel chapter 10 we read this:

CJB **Daniel 10:1** *In the third year of Koresh king of Persia, a word was revealed to Dani'el, also called Belt'shatzar. The word was certain: a great war. He understood the word, having gained understanding in the vision.*

So, the bible critics say we have a discrepancy. In chapter 1 verse 21 Daniel says he served until the 1st year of King Koresh, but in chapter 10 verse 1 we have Daniel serving Koresh in Koresh's 3rd year. And, they say, the meaning of verse 1 is that Daniel served Koresh only in Koresh's 1st year, so the fictitious author of Daniel has revealed himself as a poor historian.

This is a classic red herring and it is what happens when one tries to reduce the bible to science

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and wants to examine it to the sub-atomic level. First of all, without any needed explanation, up until the era of modern critics it was generally understood by Church leaders that all that chapter 1 verse 21 is saying is that Daniel continued serving as an advisor even when the Empire changed hands. Trying to parse the single word “until” (**ad** in Hebrew) to mean that the 1st year of King Koresh was the terminating year of Daniel’s service. However as the Brown-Briggs-Driver lexicon explains, while **ad** can mean “up until”, it also can equally mean “while”, as in the sense of “during”. So it is a flexible, not a definite, term.

So one legitimate meaning is that Daniel served there “during” the 1st year of King Koresh. And as the book of Daniel continues, the additional information of chapter 10 verse 1 that describes a time when Daniel is still with Koresh in Koresh’s 3rd year shows that the proper use of **ad** in this context is “while” or “during”, NOT “up until”. And yet the bible critics want to say that chapter 10 verse 1 doesn’t provide context, it provides contradiction.

This is a good reminder of what challenges a modern bible student faces when trying to honestly and openly study God’s Word. Because the bulk of scholarship for over a century that has influenced nearly every Christian denomination, and much of the Jewish world as well, has set about trying to prove that the bible, while a “good book”, is nonetheless not a divine book. And that Christ, while a “good man”, is nonetheless not a divine man or the Son of God.

We’ll begin the fascinating Daniel chapter 2 next time when Nebuchadnezzar has a frightening series of dreams.