

# DANIEL

WISDOM TO THE WISE



Commentary  
on the book  
of Daniel

ZDRAVKO STEFANOVIC



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# CONTENTS

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<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Daniel's Life and Career .....	16
Daniel as a Biblical Prophet.....	19
Kingdoms of Babylon and Medo-Persia .....	22
Religion in Babylon.....	25
Literary Features of Daniel's Book.....	26
The Purpose and Message of the Book.....	29
Approaches to Daniel's Book.....	31
Greek Additions to Daniel's Book.....	34
Daniel at Qumran .....	35
Influence of Daniel on the New Testament.....	36
<b>The Opening Chapter (1:1-21)</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Defeat (1:1, 2).....	45
Training (1:3-5) .....	51
Resistance (1:6-16) .....	55
Triumph (1:17-21).....	66
Summary of the Teaching .....	71
<b>General Overview of Daniel 2–6</b> .....	<b>76</b>
Literary Type of the Stories .....	76
Historical Aspect of the Stories.....	76
Setting and Purpose of the Stories .....	77

<b>King Nebuchadnezzar's First Dream (2:1-49) .....</b>	<b>80</b>
The King's Anger (2:1-13) .....	81
Daniel's Requests (2:14-23).....	89
Daniel Tells the Dream (2:24-35) .....	95
Meaning of the Dream (2:36-45) .....	102
The King's Gratitude (2:46-49) .....	109
Historical Application .....	113
Summary of the Teaching .....	115
<b>The Golden Statue (3:1-30) .....</b>	<b>119</b>
The King's Pride (3:1-7) .....	121
The Faithful Accused (3:8-12) .....	128
The Faithful Tested (3:13-27) .....	131
The King's Praise (3:28-30) .....	141
Summary of the Teaching .....	144
<b>Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream (4:1-37).....</b>	<b>148</b>
The King's Praise (4:1-3) .....	150
The Dream (4:4-18) .....	152
The Interpretation (4:19-27) .....	161
The Fulfillment of the Dream (4:28-33).....	166
The King's Praise (4:34-37) .....	170
Summary of the Teaching .....	173
<b>Belshazzar's Banquet (5:1-31) .....</b>	<b>177</b>
The King's Feast (5:1-4) .....	178
The Writing on the Wall and the Queen's Speech (5:5-12) .....	184
Bel(te)shazzar Meets Belshazzar (5:13-17) .....	189
Daniel's Speech and the Meaning of the Writing (5:18-28).....	192
The King's Death (5:29-31).....	199
Summary of the Teaching .....	203
<b>Daniel in the Lions' Den (6:1-28) .....</b>	<b>207</b>
The Best Satrap and a Deadly Decree (6:1-9) .....	208
Arrest and Sentence (6:10-18) .....	215

Deliverance (6:19-22).....	222
Release and Doom (6:23, 24) .....	225
A Saving Decree and the Best Satrap (6:25-28) .....	227
Summary of the Teaching .....	230
<b>General Overview of Daniel 7–12 .....</b>	<b>234</b>
Definition and Types of Biblical Prophecy .....	234
Prophecy and History.....	236
Prediction, Fulfillment, and Applications .....	237
Applications of Daniel’s Prophecies.....	239
The Little Horn in History .....	242
A Synopsis of Prophetic Symbols in Daniel .....	243
<b>Four Beasts and Two Heavenly Beings (7:1-28) .....</b>	<b>245</b>
Four Beasts and a Horn (7:1-8) .....	247
God’s Judgment (7:9-14) .....	260
Daniel’s Reaction (7:15-22) .....	270
Interpretation (7:23-28) .....	273
Applications .....	278
Appendix A: Literalist and Intertestamental Applications of Daniel 7 ...	286
<b>The Vision of a Ram and a Goat (8:1-27) .....</b>	<b>293</b>
Clash Between East and West (8:1-8).....	295
The Little Horn (8:9-12) .....	300
Audition (8:13, 14) .....	308
Daniel’s Reaction (8:15-18) .....	312
Interpretation (8:19-27) .....	315
Applications .....	320
Appendix B: Literalist and Intertestamental Applications of Daniel 8....	327
<b>Daniel’s Long Prayer Answered (9:1-27) .....</b>	<b>334</b>
The Confession (9:1-14).....	336
The Petition (9:15-19).....	346
The Answer (9:20-23).....	350
The Revelation (9:24-27).....	353

Applications .....	363
Appendix C: The Chiastic Structure of Daniel 9:25-27 .....	368
Appendix D: Literalist and Intertestamental Applications of Daniel 9... ..	369
<b>Daniel's Vision by the River (10:1–11:1) .....</b>	<b>376</b>
The Preparation (10:1-4) .....	378
The Vision of a Divine Being (10:5-9).....	382
Daniel's Reaction to the Vision (10:10-19) .....	384
Summary of a Long Conflict (10:20–11:1).....	390
Summary of the Teaching .....	393
<b>The Revelation About a Long War (11:2-45) .....</b>	<b>395</b>
Conflicts Between East and West (11:2-4) .....	397
Conflicts Between North and South (11:5-20).....	399
Political Activities of the Contemptible Person (11:21-30) .....	405
Religious Activities of the Contemptible Person (11:31-39) .....	408
Conflicts at the Time of the End (11:40-45) .....	413
Applications .....	416
Appendix E: Structural Parallels Between Daniel 8 and Daniel 11.....	423
Appendix F: Literalist and Intertestamental Applications of Daniel 11.....	424
<b>The Concluding Chapter (12:1-13) .....</b>	<b>433</b>
The Rise of Michael (12:1-4) .....	434
Waiting for the End (12:5-12) .....	442
The Rise of Daniel (12:13) .....	449
Applications .....	450
Appendix G: Literalist and Intertestamental Applications of Daniel 12....	453
<b>Bibliography and Index.....</b>	<b>457</b>
Selected Bibliography .....	457
Index of Scripture References .....	462

## PREFACE

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While reading the Bible as a child, I was fascinated by the stories in Daniel's book as well as its graphic visionary scenes. At that stage of life, prayer and imagination were the only tools I had for interpretation. To these were later added serious academic studies and the unique privilege of teaching this biblical book to both undergraduate and graduate students in a dozen countries on several continents over a period of some twenty years. Academic study has not diminished my fascination with Daniel's life, witness, and book. On the contrary, my appreciation of God and of the messages from Daniel's writings has constantly been growing.

*Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise* is a chapter-by-chapter and verse-by-verse commentary intended to be used by readers and students of the Bible. I hope that it will prove useful for personal study of Daniel's book. It can also be used as a textbook in colleges and seminaries. (It comprises a companion volume to my

brother Ranko's exhaustive study of the book of Revelation, titled *Revelation of Jesus Christ*.<sup>1</sup>)

The approach taken in this book can be described as biblical expository or exegetical, while the method of study is both textual and thematic. The commentary is organized in the following way: A general introduction to the person and the book of Daniel is immediately followed by an introduction and exposition of Daniel 1, the chapter containing a summary of the whole book's message. Next, there is a general overview of Daniel 2–6 and then introductions to these chapters, each of which is followed by the author's translation from the original Hebrew and Aramaic in consultation with the New International Version of the Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the Revised Standard Version. (I have taken quotations from biblical books other than Daniel from the New International Version.) Detailed notes examine

the linguistic, literary, and historical aspects of the original text, while the Exposition suggests what the text meant at the time it was written based on what the author most likely intended to say. What the text means today is briefly explored in the Summary of the Teaching presented at the end of each chapter.

Another overview introduces Daniel 7–12, followed by a chapter-by-chapter and verse-by-verse study and interpretation of each of the visionary chapters. This section of the commentary differs from the preceding portion in that at the end of the chapter, instead of the Summary of the Teaching, two types of Applications of Daniel's prophecies are presented, one in the history of the Christian church and the other more of a devotional type of application to the reader's personal life.

Since the approach in this commentary is biblical expository, it focuses on the text and themes from the book of Daniel and on the points of teaching that are directly derived from them. Because of its focus on the biblical text, this commentary is *not* intended to be a resource tool providing a wealth of material on apocalyptic literature nor any other subject that is explored by other disciplines such as dogmatic theology or church history. To take one example, the topic of divine judgment is addressed in the Exposition and Applications section on the pertinent passages from

Daniel. But a systematic presentation of this biblical topic goes beyond the scope of this study and can be found elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The present study aims at affirming the primacy and authority of the biblical text while at the same time offering fresh and constructive insights relating to the reading, interpretation, and applications of Daniel's stories, visions, and auditions.

The present commentary continues the tradition of the intense interest and study of the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation among Seventh-day Adventists. Adventist publishing houses have produced no less than six in-depth books and commentaries on Daniel: (1) Uriah Smith wrote a chapter-by-chapter commentary titled *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation*.<sup>3</sup> (2) A part of volume four of the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, written mostly by W. G. C. Murdoch in consultation with Siegfried. H. Horn and edited by Francis D. Nichol, is a verse-by-verse commentary on Daniel's book.<sup>4</sup> (3) Desmond Ford wrote a commentary titled *Daniel*.<sup>5</sup> (4) The first of the two volumes of *God Cares* by C. Mervyn Maxwell presents "the message of Daniel for you and your family."<sup>6</sup> (5) Jacques Doukhan's book titled *Secrets of Daniel* presents a study of Daniel's life and book.<sup>7</sup> And (6) William Shea's commentary delves into the themes from Daniel's book and their applications in the believer's life.<sup>8</sup> Needless to say, these and many

other books and articles have enriched my own study of Daniel.

I am indebted to a number of individuals who have helped me grow in my understanding of Daniel's book and in the writing of this commentary. In the first place, I thank my God, who, in Daniel's words, is generous in dispensing wisdom and strength to human beings. As Daniel said, " 'He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning' " (Dan. 2:21b). Without the insights that came in answer to my prayers, this commentary would have never been completed. Next, I feel indebted to my parents, Milenko and Jozefina, who taught me to love God's Word. I am grateful to my wife, Božana, and our sons, Jonathan and David, for their support and patience.

It would take much space to list the names of the colleagues and of the students from my classes far and near who have all provided an inspiration to my study and writing. A special word of thanks goes to my colleagues and friends who read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions: Tarsee Li, Gudmundur Olafsson, William Shea, Ranko Stefanovic, and David Thomas. The administrators of Walla Walla College and the School of Theology kindly voted my (first ever) sabbatical quarter, while the

members of the Faculty Development Committee generously provided grants to cover some of the expenses. For these favors, I feel profound appreciation. I am indebted to Becky Masson for her careful proofreading of the manuscript. Last, but not least, I am thankful to Pacific Press® Publishing Association and its president, Dale Galusha, for the decision to publish this commentary, and I wish to extend special appreciation to David Jarnes for his work of the final editing of the text.

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3. Uriah Smith, *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation*, rev. and ill. ed. (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1944).

4. Francis D. Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1955), 743-881.

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# THE OPENING CHAPTER

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(1:1-21)

Chapter 1 of Daniel serves as a prologue that “records the historical setting for the entire book.”<sup>1</sup> Some scholars believe that the original language of this chapter was Aramaic and that its purpose was to introduce chapters 2–7.<sup>2</sup> It is better, however, to view this chapter as the introduction to the whole book of Daniel. Its powerful story sets the stage for everything that follows, while at the same time it functions as a summary of the whole book’s message.<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that one can find in this chapter the seeds of all that the rest of the book features: “All the major themes to be developed later by narrative and visions are present in this introductory passage.”<sup>4</sup> The most prominent themes that permeate this chapter include a test of faithfulness and the victory that results in the exaltation of the faithful.

The event reported at the beginning of chapter 1 dates to the year 605 B.C. This view is preferred to the one held by

some scholars, who consider the opening verses “a telescoping of various events that led up to the eventual dispersion of the Israelites in the sixth century.”<sup>5</sup> This year is remembered in history because of the battle for the control of an Egyptian military outpost at Carchemish, near the Euphrates River. A few years earlier, these forces had fought each other at Haran. In the battle at Carchemish, the armies of Egypt and Babylon (in alliance with the Medes) clashed in their contest for control of Syria-Palestine. In the end, the Egyptians were defeated and pushed southward (Jer. 46:2) by the army called in Ezekiel “the most ruthless of all nations” (Ezek. 32:12; cf. 30:11; 31:12). The official Babylonian chroniclers provide some valuable insights into these events:

In the twenty-first year the king of Akkad [Nabopolassar] stayed in his own land, Nebuchadrezzar his eldest son, the crown prince, mustered (the

Babylonian army) and took command of his troops; he marched to Carchemish which is on the bank of the Euphrates, and crossed the river (to go) against the Egyptian army which lay in Carchemish. . . . fought with each other and the Egyptian army withdrew before him. He accomplished their defeat and to non-existence [beat?] them. . . .

At that time Nebuchadrezzar conquered the whole area of the Hattic country [Hamath].<sup>6</sup> For twenty-one years Nabopolassar had been king of Babylon. On the 8th of the month of Ab [August] he died (lit. 'the fates'); in the month of Elul [September] Nebuchadrezzar returned to Babylon and on the first day of the month of Elul he sat on the royal throne in Babylon.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in that same year there was a change of kings in Babylon. Nebuchadrezzar, the crown prince who commanded the Babylonian army, left the captives in the hands of his generals and hurried back to Babylon, taking the shortcut across the desert. "This haste was doubtless due to a desire to prevent any usurper from taking the throne."<sup>8</sup> About a year after this battle, all the kings of Syria-Palestine came before him, and he received their tribute.<sup>9</sup>

According to a passage from the Pentateuch, God had promised to protect Israel's land in a supernatural way so that " 'no one will covet your land when

you go up three times each year to appear before the Lord your God' " (Exod. 34:24). This promise, however, was given on condition that the people would worship Yahweh only and keep His covenant stipulations, including their faithfulness in observing the Sabbath rest (Jer. 17:20-27). Proverbs 16:7 says, "When a person's ways are pleasing to the LORD, / he makes even his enemies live at peace with him." In several places in the Old Testament, one can read that the two exiles that the people of Israel suffered—to Assyria and to Babylon—were the consequences of their breaking of the covenant—their practice of idolatry and oppression of their fellow human beings. Says the chronicler, "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy" (2 Chron. 36:15, 16).

In a famous message delivered in the Jerusalem temple, the prophet Jeremiah had warned the people of his time that they should reform their ways and not "trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!'" (Jer. 7:4). The cherished promise that "God is within her [Jerusalem], she will not fall; / God will help her at break of

day” (Ps. 46:5) was not a blank check. God’s people had exhausted the measure of His abundant mercy and “there was no [other] remedy” but exile. Then, when the people were exiled from the land God had given them, the law was no longer violated, and consequently, “the land enjoyed its sabbath rests” (2 Chron. 36:21).

Daniel 1 opens with a brief report of a Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem, and it ends with the triumph of the faithful at the palace in Babylon. Thus the structure of the story recorded in this chapter is concentric, and it is clearly built on a reversal from defeat to triumph:

1. Defeat (1:1, 2)
2. Training (1:3-5)
3. Resistance (1:6-16, the longest part)
4. Triumph (1:17-21)

The longest part of the story in the chapter deals with the resistance of the young men to the influence of the culture and religion that was prevalent in Babylon. Two chronological markers, one found in the first verse of the chapter and the other in the last, bracket the main story and thus form an *inclusio* that identifies the span of Daniel’s career and the length of the exile to Babylon.

### **Defeat (1:1, 2)**

The book of Daniel opens with a report on the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, followed by an im-

portant reminder that God was in complete control of this tragic event in Judah’s history.

***<sup>1</sup>In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup>And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the land of Shinar, to the temple of his god(s), and put in the treasure house of his god(s).***

### *Notes*

**1:1 “In the third year.”** The first word that is used in the Hebrew text of this verse is *bišnat*; it means “in the year of.” Because it is the opening word of the whole book, it reminds the reader of the first word in Genesis, *b<sup>ə</sup>rēšit*, which literally means “in the beginning (of).” Both words are combinations of the preposition *b*, “in,” with a feminine noun in the construct state. Although this is most likely a coincidence, it is worth noticing.

The text links King Jehoiakim’s third year of reign with Nebuchadnezzar’s first bout with Jerusalem, in 605 B.C. It is clear from this statement that the author is using the accession-year method of counting the years of a king’s reign, in agreement with a practice that was common in Babylon. According to this chronological method, the first official year of a king’s reign began with the celebration of the first New Year festival (*Akitu*) after his accession to the throne. Thus, the event referred to in this verse took place in Nebuchadnezzar’s accession year, rather than in the first official year of his reign. In contrast, the prophet

Jeremiah, who lived in Jerusalem, used the non-accession-year system and accordingly dated the first year of King Nebuchadnezzar to “the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah” (Jer. 25:1; cf. 46:2). The two methods of reckoning the years of King Jehoiakim’s reign given in the two passages can be presented as follows:

*Daniel 1:1 (Babylon):*

Accession year	1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year
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*Jeremiah 25:1 (Jerusalem):*

1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	4 <sup>th</sup> year
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**“Jehoiakim king of Judah.”** Jehoiakim’s father, King Josiah, was killed at Megiddo in the battle of Haran in 609 B.C. (2 Kings 23:34). Jehoiakim’s brother Jehoahaz became king in place of Josiah but was later dethroned by the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco, who then appointed Jehoiakim king over Judah. This king’s original name was Eliakim, but according to 2 Chronicles 36:2-4, Neco changed his name to Jehoiakim (cp. 2 Kings 23:34). Although in the year 605 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar had Jehoiakim bound in bronze shackles “to take him to Babylon” (2 Chron. 36:5-8), there is no evidence that he was actually taken there. In fact, 2 Kings 24:6 says that Jehoiakim died in the land of Judah. His son, Jehoiachin, was exiled to Babylon in the year 597 B.C. A published cuneiform text from Babylon speaks in detail of daily provisions of food given to Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and his sons.<sup>10</sup>

**“Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.”** Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 B.C.) was the second ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which controlled

the ancient Near East for almost a century. In this verse, as in Jeremiah 46:2, he is referred to as *melek*, “king,” through anachronism (prolepsis). During the battle of Carchemish he was only the crown prince. Anachronism is found elsewhere in the Bible, for example, in the place names Bethel (Gen. 12:8), Dan (Gen. 14:14), and possibly Rameses (Exod. 1:11).

The spelling “Nebuchadnezzar” is consistent in all thirty-two occurrences in the first five chapters of Daniel’s book. The spelling “Nebuchadrezzar,” on the other hand, is found in the book of Ezekiel and is closer to its original Babylonian form, *Nabû-kudurri-uşur*, which literally means “O Nabu, guard the offspring [the eldest son]!” or “O Nabu, protect the boundary stone!” The book of Jeremiah uses the two spellings interchangeably. Some scholars have suggested that the spelling “Nebuchadnezzar” may be the result of a deliberate corruption of this king’s name by an opposition group in Babylon.<sup>11</sup> The place name “Babylon” may refer to either the capital city of the empire or to the main province of the empire, also known as Babylonia.

**“Besieged it.”** Neither this verse nor any other biblical or extrabiblical text reports a battle for Jerusalem in the year 605 B.C. Hence, it is most likely that Jehoiakim surrendered to the Babylonians without a fight, which may explain why he was not exiled to Babylon.

**1:2 “And the Lord gave.”** The word <sup>a</sup>*dônāy*, “Lord,” is used in this context rather than God’s covenantal name *YHWH*, “the LORD,” or the general title <sup>e</sup>*lôhîm*, “God.” Most likely, the author used this name of God to show that God was in charge of the events that were taking place. The Lord is greater than a mere local deity. In addi-

tion to being the patron God of Israel, he is the Lord of all the earth. This statement also contains the first of the three occurrences of the verb *nātan*, “he gave” in this chapter. The other two occurrences are in verses 9 and 17. Its use in this verse shows that the Lord was in full control when the leaders of Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonian army.

**“Jehoiakim king of Judah.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:1.

**“Into his hand.”** In the Bible, the word *yād*, “hand,” is often used figuratively to describe a person’s power and authority. When combined with the passive form of the verb *nātan*, “to give,” it means a defeat in a military conflict (Dan. 11:11).

**“Some of the articles from the temple of God.”** After a battle, the winning army would carry the booty back to their land. The trophies included some sacred temple objects such as containers made of precious material and used in sacrificial rituals. It was not unusual to see idols carried into exile. The victors did this to show the superiority of their gods over those of the defeated nation (1 Sam. 5:2; 21:9; Dan. 11:7, 8; Joel 3:5). So, for example, the prophet Jeremiah declared, “Chemosh [a Moabite god] will go into exile, / together with his priests and officials” (Jer. 48:7), and he said the same would happen to Molech, an Ammonite god (Jer. 49:3).

According to 2 Chronicles 4:16, the sacred articles taken included “the pots, shovels, meat forks and all related articles.” Daniel 5:2 adds “the gold and silver goblets.” Ezra 1:11 puts the total number of articles taken by the Babylonians at fifty-four hundred. Daniel 1:2 specifies that only “some” of the sacred vessels were taken to Baby-

lon at this time. The rest were carried away in subsequent invasions. And Jeremiah 27:16-22 says that “Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon did not take away” a considerable portion of the temple treasure. The articles that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem were the only surviving material link between the first and the second temple (Ezra 1). The narratives of the books of Daniel and Ezra imply that King Nebuchadnezzar treated the sacred vessels with respect.

**“The land of Shinar.”** The Greek translation known as the Septuagint renders this expression as “Babylon.” The word in the original Hebrew is *šin’ār*, “Shinar,” one of the traditional names of the city (and the province) of Babylon. The name is found in a few other places in the Old Testament (Gen. 10:10; 11:2; 14:1, 9; Isa. 11:11; and Zech. 6:10). In the past, some scholars attempted to relate Shinar to the land of Sumer, traditionally known as the cradle of the first civilization. It is best, however, to consider this term as describing the land of Babylonia.

In the context of this chapter, the word *Shinar* alludes to the story of the building of the city and the Tower of Babel. According to Genesis 11, this project ended in confusion. The author is using here an “intentional archaism” to remind the reader that God called Abraham, the father of the nation, to leave this place of confusion and go to the Promised Land (Gen. 12:1-3). In Daniel 1, Abraham’s descendants, the Israelite captives, are pictured as reversing their ancestor’s experience. As they traveled together with the temple articles to Babylon, they were actually backtracking Abraham’s journey of faith.

The regular trade route to Babylon taken by the captives went north of Jerusalem toward the

cities of Riblah and Hamath. It then followed the river Euphrates southeastward, a trip totaling more than one thousand kilometers.

**“The temple of his god(s).”** The original Hebrew says *bêt ʿlōhāw*, “the house of his god(s),” and it contrasts with the previously given expression “the temple of God.” The articles were deposited in Esagila, the temple in Babylon built in honor of the city’s patron god, Marduk, whose popular name was Bel, “lord” (Isa. 46:1) Since King Nebuchadnezzar worshiped this god (Dan. 4:8), he named his eldest son, the crown prince, Amel-Marduk, after him (Evil-Merodach in 2 Kings 25:27; Jer. 52:31). Ezra 1:7 and 5:14 specify that the vessels were “placed in the temple of his [the king’s] god(s)” and remained there during the whole period of the exile. It is significant that the expression “his god” is given twice in this verse, most likely for emphasis.

### *Expositton (1:1, 2)*

**1:1** As stated previously, the first two verses introduce not only this chapter but also the entire book of Daniel. They present the reader with some of the most dramatic events in Judah’s history. The exile to Babylon that began *in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim* signaled the end of the political independence of God’s chosen people and their nation’s Davidic dynasty. The opening words in the chapter give the historical, geographical, and theological setting of the whole book. “Historically, they set the stories in the time of the Babylonian exile. Geographically, they locate them in Babylon. Theologically, they assert that

the exile is not due to the inability of Judah’s God to defend Jerusalem, but rather is brought about by a deliberate act of her God.”<sup>12</sup>

The Israelites considered Jerusalem “beautiful in its loftiness, / the joy of the whole earth” (Ps. 48:2), while the Babylonians prized Babylon as “the jewel of kingdoms, / the glory of the Babylonians’ pride” (Isa. 13:19). The prophet Habakkuk had written (Hab. 1; 2) that God would use the Chaldeans from Babylon as an instrument to judge his covenant people. Now, *in the third year of Jehoiakim*, one such judgment had occurred, when this king of Judah surrendered to the Babylonians. Prior to this time, the king was a vassal of the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco, who had appointed him to rule over Judah. The very mention of King Jehoiakim’s name in this verse reminds the reader of someone who dared to cut into pieces and throw into a fire a scroll that contained God’s message to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 36:22-24). As for Nebuchadnezzar, he is by prolepsis called *king of Babylon* in this verse, although in reality he was still only the crown prince.

Babylon obtained control of Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah, more than a century after Assyria’s deportation of the citizens of the northern kingdom of Israel (722 B.C.). Before Babylon’s defeat of Egypt at Carchemish, the kingdom of Judah was in alliance with Egypt. The Babylonian

army laid siege to Jerusalem on three separate occasions, though only the last two invasions feature in extrabiblical history. During the first expedition, which followed the defeat of the Egyptian army (Jer. 46:1-12), King Jehoiakim surrendered to the Babylonians. At that time, Daniel and other members of Judah's nobility were led to exile in Babylon. During the second expedition, when Jehoiachin was king in Jerusalem, the Babylonians came and led the king, the priests, and the princes into captivity. Daniel's contemporary Ezekiel was in this group of exiles. Some ten years later, King Zedekiah and most of the remaining people were taken to Babylon. Only the poorest of the poor, referred to as *'am hā'āres*, "the people of the land," were left to care for Palestine.

The three major Babylonian invasions can be summarized as follows:

1. **605 B.C.** Members of the royal family and nobility, including Daniel and his friends, were led to Babylon (2 Kings 24:1, 2; 2 Chron. 36:5-7).
2. **597 B.C.** King Jehoiachin, princes, and priests, including the prophet Ezekiel, were taken to Babylon (2 Kings 24:10-14; 2 Chron. 36:10).
3. **586 B.C.** King Zedekiah and all the remaining people other than the poor were exiled to Babylon (2 Kings 25:1-21; 2 Chron. 36:17-20).

**1:2** The author says that *the Lord gave* the king of Judah along with the temple articles into the hands of the Babylonians. To the faithful, this bold statement of trust says that God was still in control and was a source of strength and courage. After all, had not God, through the prophet Jeremiah, called King Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" (Jer. 27:6)? Had he not put a time limit to the period of the exile in Babylon (Jer. 29:10)? That same *Lord gave* Judah's king, the captives, and the holy objects into the enemy's hand. Because King Jehoiakim had surrendered to the Babylonians, he was not taken to Babylon but eventually died in the land of Judah (2 Kings 24:6). The destiny of the captives and the temple vessels was very different, since they were *carried off* to Babylonia.

As the neighboring nations saw Jerusalem's defeat and the temple vessels taken to Mesopotamia, they must have concluded that Yahweh, the God whose dwelling was in that city, was defeated by the god Marduk (Bel) and was now led captive to Babylonia. "Wars were fought in a god's name and plunder thus belonged to him. The temple articles are his booty,"<sup>13</sup> symbolizing the captivity of conquered gods as well as people. Since the Jews did not have an image of their God, the Babylonians carried off their temple vessels instead.<sup>14</sup> "To all appearances, the God of Jerusalem has been defeated by the gods of Babylon."<sup>15</sup>

In part, the book of Daniel was written to disprove this misconception. It emphatically affirms that the Lord could never become a captive of Marduk, the patron god of Babylon. Had not the previous attempts to hold the God of Israel captive to the pagan gods failed (cf. 1 Sam. 5)? King Nebuchadnezzar defeated Jerusalem and its people, but he was able to do so only because the Lord allowed it to happen. Through the prophet Isaiah, he had predicted long before, in the time of King Hezekiah, that these holy vessels would some day be carried to Babylon (Isa. 39:6). This same God was still in control of the events in the world. In fact, he had set the limits to the power of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Mention of the temple articles in the beginning of Daniel's book also prepares the reader for the story of Belshazzar's feast (chap. 5), which is placed in the context of Babylon's fall.

The intentional use of the archaic name *Shinar* for Babylon takes the reader back to the story recorded in Genesis 11 in which the human race tries to defy God's plan by building an imposing city-tower intended to be the capital of the world. Told "not without humor,"<sup>16</sup> the story reports that the project was in the end aborted, resulting in a new—taunting—name given to the place: Babel, or "confusion." In the following chapter of Genesis (chap. 12), God called Abram to leave this place of rebel-

lion and confusion to go to a land that he promised to give to Abram's descendants so that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Abram's journey of faith started in Haran (Gen. 12:4) and continued as far as Bethel (Gen. 12:8), until he reached the Negev, or the south (Gen. 13:3).

Years later, Abraham's grandson Jacob backtracked his grandfather's journey of faith after he deceived his brother and was forced to flee his father's home. Jacob left Beersheba (Gen. 28:10), the main town in the Negev, traveled to Bethel (Gen. 28:19), and finally reached his destination, the city of Haran, located in Mesopotamia (Gen. 29:4). In a similar way, Abraham's descendants, by leaving the Promised Land and going into exile *to the land of Shinar*, were reversing their forefather's journey of faith. "Now with the covenant broken by the descendants of Abraham, there was—by means of a captivity—a movement back to Shinar."<sup>17</sup> The use of the term "Israelites," or literally "the sons of Israel [Jacob]," in verse 3 is probably intentional, reminding the reader that these captives were actually the descendants of Jacob. As they were on their way to Mesopotamia, they were in reality following in the footsteps of their ancestor Jacob, who was the first family member to reverse Abraham's journey of faith to the Promised Land.

In the eyes of biblical prophets, the land of Babylonia was a center of idola-

try. The prophet Zechariah was told in a vision that *the land of Shinar* was the “dwelling of iniquity and wickedness” (Zech. 5:5-11). Daniel and his people went into captivity mainly because of the breaking of God’s covenant. Later, the Jewish rabbis told a story that attempted to answer the question of why Israel went into exile in Babylon rather than in all other lands. They said it was “because the home of Abraham was there. They parable [tell] a parable. Unto what is the matter like? It is like a woman who disgraces her husband so that he sends her away. He sends her away to the home of her father.”<sup>18</sup> Some commentators take note of the fact that after the Babylonian captivity, “idolatry never again became a major temptation to Israel.”<sup>19</sup>

### Training (1:3-5)

After a brief reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem, the text focuses on some of the captives who were selected and brought to Babylon for special training.

**<sup>3</sup>Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—<sup>4</sup>young men without any defect, good-looking, skillful in all branches of wisdom, having knowledge, quick to understand, and competent to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Chaldeans. <sup>5</sup>The king assigned them a daily amount of choice food and**

**wine from the king’s table. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to enter the king’s service.**

### Notes

**1:3 “Ashpenaz.”** Although it has been suggested that this is an Old Persian term that means “inkeeper,” most ancient and modern translations have taken it as a personal name. The name is attested outside of the Bible.

**“Chief of his court officials.”** The word *sārîs*, “a court official,” is translated by some as “eunuch” because originally, it designated a castrated male person (Isa. 56:3). The Hebrew title *rab sārîs*, “chief eunuch,” designated the person in charge of the king’s harem (women’s quarters).<sup>20</sup> Later, the semantic range of this term was broadened to include any trusted official of the king (2 Kings 18:17; Jer. 39:3, 13). Joseph’s master Potiphar, for example, is called *sārîs* in Genesis 39:1. As “chief palace servant,”<sup>21</sup> Ashpenaz was the person in charge of the education of the royal youth. He was directly responsible to the king himself for their successful training (v. 18). As for the four young Hebrews, it cannot be demonstrated that they were made literal eunuchs in Babylon because the physical perfection mentioned in verse 4 could not be applied to eunuchs.

**“Some of the Israelites.”** Literally, the text says *mibb<sup>e</sup>nê yiśrā’el*, “some of the sons of Israel.” The plural noun *b<sup>e</sup>nê*, “sons of,” functions here as a noun of relation and thus expresses the concept of membership in a group. Therefore, it is best translated idiomatically rather than literally<sup>22</sup>—hence the rendering of the whole phrase *mibb<sup>e</sup>nê yiśrā’el* as “some of the Israelites.”

The name *Israel* reminds the reader of the patriarch Jacob, who spent part of his life in the land of Mesopotamia. Thus the use of this term "is presumably theological."<sup>23</sup> In the book of Daniel, the name *Israel* appears only here and in chapter 9. See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:2.

**"The royal family and the nobility."** It is not very clear whether these two terms express a single concept, something like "the royal family, that is, the nobility," with the conjunction functioning here as explicative, or if the two have separate meanings, as is reflected in this translation. The title *happartēmîm*, "nobility," comes from Persian and is used only here and in Esther 1:3 and 6:9. This detail gives additional information about the family backgrounds of Daniel and his friends. They may have been members of either the royal family of Davidic descent or of the noble families from Judah. Ancient traditions relate the four young men to either King Zedekiah (Josephus) or King Hezekiah (Jerome).<sup>24</sup> In either case, they would already have had some kind of diplomatic training back in their homeland.

**1:4 "Young men."** The expression *yēlādîm*, "young men," means that the youth were in their adolescent years (Gen. 37:30). It has been suggested that the four Hebrews were between fifteen and eighteen years old when they were taken to Babylon. A scholar has called this "a teachable age."<sup>25</sup> Joseph was around eighteen when sold into slavery (Gen. 37:2). The same plural noun *yēlādîm*, "young men," is used in 1 Kings 12:8 to describe the friends of King Rehoboam who grew up with him and were his counselors.

**"Without any defect."** The expression *ên-bāhem kol-mûm*, "without any blemish," is used to describe Israelite priests who served in the

sanctuary (Lev. 21:17-23) as well as the sacrifices that were offered there (Lev. 22:18-25). The term *mûm*, "defect," is also used in nonreligious contexts. Absalom was described as a person who had "no blemish in him" (2 Sam. 14:25), just as was the beloved in Song of Songs 4:7 and Job in Job 31:7.

**"Skillful in all branches of wisdom."** The Hebrew noun *maškilîm*, "skillful, wise," that is used here describes persons who are prudent and have insight. Both this noun (Dan. 12:3) and its root (9:22) figure prominently in the visionary part of the book that teaches the divine origin of wisdom and skill. "Importantly, these youngsters are also described as *maškilîm* (NRSV 'versed'), a term that is used later in the book for those who are 'wise' enough to bring understanding to many, even at the price of their own suffering and death (Dan. 11:33, 35; 12:3, 10)."<sup>26</sup>

**"Having knowledge."** This original wording, *wēyōdē'ê da'at*, literally means "and those who know knowledge." This combining of two forms of the same verbal root is a common phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew; it is called *cognate accusative* (paronomasia). Its purpose is to place emphasis on certain people, events, or actions.

**"Competent to serve."** The literal meaning of the original phrase, *wa'āšer kōaḥ bāhem*, is "and those who have strength in them to stand [in the palace of the king]."

**"He was to teach them."** The subject of this part of the verse is Ashpenaz.

**"The language and literature of the Chaldeans."** The original text uses the name *kašdîm*, "Chaldeans," for the Babylonians. The two geographical names, "the land of the Chaldeans" and "Babylonia," are interchangeable in the Bible

(Jer. 24:5; 25:12; Ezek. 1:3). Today, most of scholars hold that the language of the Chaldeans was Akkadian,<sup>27</sup> while an older view was that they were “originally an Aramaic-speaking people.”<sup>28</sup> The cities of Sippar, Uruk, and Babylon were the three centers of Chaldean learning.

The language component of the curriculum most likely included Akkadian, which was a Semitic language. Akkadian was written in wedge-shaped characters on clay tablets that were either dried in the sun or baked in a kiln to harden them. The curriculum also included Sumerian, the traditional language of religion in Babylon. And most importantly, the Hebrews would learn Aramaic, the international language of commerce and diplomacy.

The wisdom component of the curriculum consisted of mathematics, astrology, and the interpretation of dreams. Divination and omen interpretation were two types of expertise that “required extensive education in the vast Babylonian omen literature.”<sup>29</sup> Royal servicemen included “scribes, advisors, sages, diplomats, provincial governors or attendants to members of the royal household.”<sup>30</sup>

**1:5 “Choice food.”** The Hebrew word *pat-bag* means “rich food” or “choice food.” It comes from the Old Persian word *patibaga* and originally meant either “an offering” or a portion of the special food served at the royal palace. This term is consistently followed by the noun *hammelek*, “the king”—underlining the fact that this rich food was provided at the king’s expense, and he, therefore, was its provider. The word *pat-bag* occurs in the Bible only here and in Daniel 11:26. The general words for “food and drink” commonly used in the Bible are given in Daniel

1:10. Ancient texts have been discovered from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar that specifically mention the food rations given to Jehoiachin, the imprisoned king of Judah and his family. They confirm the historicity of the statements found in Jeremiah 52:34 and 2 Kings 25:30. See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:10.

**“Educated for three years.”** The verbal root *gd*, “to train” or “to educate,” is used in the simple active stem meaning “to become great.” In the intensive stem, this Hebrew word is used of raising children in Isaiah 1:2.<sup>31</sup> This word figures prominently in the visionary part of the book, where it is often associated with pride (Dan. 8:8-11). Scholars argue, based on some extrabiblical evidence, that a three-year education was the standard practice in Persia and possibly in Neo-Babylon.<sup>32</sup> Verses 18 and 19 add more information on the training, stating that at the end of this period, the young men were to be examined and that the final test included an interview with the king himself.

**“To enter the king’s service.”** Literally, the Hebrew says *ya’amdu lipnê hammelek*, “they were to stand before the king.” This was a technical term for royal service commonly used in the Bible (cf. 1 Kings 10:8; 12:8). It is also used in a religious sense in Deuteronomy 10:8 and 2 Chronicles 29:11.

### *Exposition (1:3-5)*

**1:3** Choice captives were selected for special training so they could serve at the court. Then, if they ever returned to their homeland, they would function as vital links between the palace and the provinces in the empire. Scholars differ

on the issue of whether this selection was made in Jerusalem or in Babylon. Undoubtedly, other youth in addition to the four young men who are introduced in verse 6 were selected from Judah as well as from the rest of the countries of Syria and Palestine, the region conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. Yet the focus of the story is on these four.

Ashpenaz, the king's *chief official*, was in charge of the selection and education of the young captives. Since he is called literally "the chief eunuch" in this verse, some have concluded that all the *young men* that are mentioned here, including Daniel and his friends, were also made "eunuchs" in the literal sense of the word. While it is true that the Hebrew title in a narrow sense can describe a castrated person ("I am only a dry tree," Isa. 56:3), in its broader semantic scope, it can stand for any trusted official of the king. Potiphar, for example, is called a *sārīs* in Genesis 39:1, even though he was married. Thus, one can say that "it is not necessary to draw the conclusion that the [Hebrew] youths were made eunuchs" in Babylon.<sup>33</sup>

**1:4** The *young men* were between fifteen and eighteen years old, an ideal teachable age. The text discloses several criteria for their selection: family background, physical appearance, intellectual capabilities combined with readiness to learn quickly, and palace manners (etiquette). Physically, they had to be *without any defect*. The Bible uses the

same language to describe the priests and the sacrifices in the sanctuary (Lev. 21:17-23; 22:18-25) but also young people like Absalom (2 Sam. 14:25) and the beloved (Song 4:7). "Babylonian diviners were also expected to be 'without blemish in body and limbs' when they approached the gods."<sup>34</sup>

The Chaldeans were the master race in Neo-Babylon, and by profession, they were the priests of the god Marduk (cf. Isa. 46:1). Moreover, they were the guardians of Babylon's sacred traditions. Ethnically, they belonged to the Semitic family of peoples. Prior to gaining control over Babylonia, they had dwelt in territories south of the city of Babylon. In biblical passages, the names "Chaldeans" and "Babylonians" are often used interchangeably.

Before the four Hebrews were exiled, the revealed word of God was the center of their life and learning. But in Babylon, their studies were to focus on Mesopotamian literature and sciences. Some of the disciplines practiced in Babylon posed a serious problem to these young men. Practice of magic, for example, was clearly prohibited by Mosaic legislation (Deut.18:9-14) as well as by the biblical prophets (Isa. 8:19, 20). It has been rightly observed that it was not necessarily the knowledge but the practice of magic that these texts condemned.<sup>35</sup>

**1:5** In accordance with the ancient customs, the king himself provided

*choice food* and wine for those who resided or served at the palace (1 Kings 4:7). Doing so ensured that he would be given credit for their success. The text repeatedly states that the food and drink came *from the king's table*. Yet, the young Hebrews must have clearly understood that their God, the Creator of everything, rather than the king or his god, was the ultimate Provider of all things, whether food and drink or life and wisdom.

The Babylonians planned the educational process to last *three years*, after which the young men's progress would be evaluated through a final test, a part of which was an interview with King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:18, 19). Upon successfully passing that examination, the young men would be qualified to "stand before the king," a term for royal service that had both secular (1 Kings 10:8; 12:8) and religious (2 Chron. 29:11) connotations.

Since there is sufficient evidence in the book to show that Daniel studied the scroll of the prophet Isaiah while in Babylon, one can conclude that the four Hebrews were well aware of a statement made by Isaiah that put the exile in the perspective of God's plan for their lives. After a Babylonian delegation visited Jerusalem, Isaiah told King Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will

be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. 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 palace of the king of Babylon" (Isa. 39:5-7). Daniel and his friends must have read these words more than once, which would have helped them understand the place of God's providence in their lives and also in Judah's history. Their trust in God's leading "did not prevent them from being taken into exile, but it did give them the opportunity to witness for their faith during that exile."<sup>36</sup>

### Resistance (1:6-16)

The young men's resistance to the acculturation in Babylon began with their attitude toward the new names given them and their decision not to partake of the rich food and drink that the king generously provided for them.

*<sup>6</sup>Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. <sup>7</sup>The chief official gave them (new) names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.*

*<sup>8</sup>But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal choice food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. <sup>9</sup>Now God had given Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief official, <sup>10</sup>but the chief 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? So you would endanger my life with the king."*

<sup>11</sup>*Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, <sup>12</sup>"Please test your servants for ten days: Let us be given only vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>13</sup>Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and deal with your servants in accordance with what you see."<sup>14</sup>So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.*

<sup>15</sup>*At the end of the ten days it was obvious that they were healthier and better nourished than all of the young men who ate the royal choice food. <sup>16</sup>So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.*

## Notes

**1:6 "Among these."** See the Notes on Daniel 1:3.

**"Some from Judah."** Literally, the text reads *mibb<sup>o</sup>nê y<sup>h</sup>ûdâ*, "from the sons of Judah." The Hebrew word for "sons" that is used here functions as a noun of relation. See the Notes on Daniel 1:3.

**"Daniel."** All four Hebrew names listed here are theophoric—i.e., they contain a form of a divine name in them. Daniel's name, *dānīyē'l*, means "God is my judge!" The word "judge" is frequently used in the Bible in a positive way, with a meaning of "deliverer" or "savior" (cf. Judges 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15; 6:14). Three other passages in the Bible mention people who bore the same name: a son of King David (1 Chron. 3:1), a man whose name is in the lists of returned

Judean captives (Ezra 8:2; Neh. 10:6), and a person spoken of in Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and 28:3. Scholars are divided as to whether this latter person is the Daniel who wrote the prophetic book. Some argue that this is the case,<sup>37</sup> while others relate the name to a fifteenth-century B.C. "righteous ruler" called *dānīl* from the ancient city of Ugarit (Phoenicia).<sup>38</sup> Since Daniel was Ezekiel's contemporary and was famous for his wisdom even during his lifetime (Dan. 5:11, 12), it is possible to identify him with the person mentioned in Ezekiel's book.

**"Hananiah."** This name, which also appears elsewhere in the Bible, means "Yahweh is gracious/merciful."

**"Mishael."** Although the meaning of this Hebrew name is not very clear, it is attested elsewhere in the Bible. It probably means something like "Who is what God is!"

**"Azariah."** This name is based on the common Hebrew verb *'āzar*, "to help," which occurs frequently in the Bible. It means "Yahweh has helped." It is also found in the name *Ebenezer*, "the stone of help."

**1:7 "Chief."** The Hebrew noun *śar*, "prince," is used here instead of *rab*, "chief," as in verse 3. The two terms are used synonymously, both describing the position that Ashpenaz held.

**"Belteshazzar."** In interpreting the meaning of this name, one is faced with two possibilities: (1) Belteshazzar is a corruption of a common Babylonian name *Bel-sharra-usur*, which expressed a prayer to the god Bel (Marduk) to protect the king.<sup>39</sup> A second possibility is that the name contains the title for Bel's consort, Belet (or Belit), with the meaning "May [the goddess] Belet protect the king!" The first possibility is pre-

ferred here because it is supported by Daniel 4:8, which says that Daniel was given his Babylonian name after the name of Nebuchadnezzar's god. Moreover, the Greek text of Daniel has this name spelled *Baltasar*, the same way King Belshazzar's name is spelled in Daniel 5.

Scholars have suggested that all the Babylonian names in the Hebrew Masoretic Text "may be deliberately corrupted forms of names extolling pagan gods."<sup>40</sup> (On the name *Nebuchadnezzar*, see the *Notes* on Daniel 1:1.) This suggestion has been made because no reconstruction of the four Babylonian names "is completely convincing."<sup>41</sup> The question is then raised regarding the possible reason for the corruption of these new names. Rather than being accidental, the change must have been intentional—the author of the book corrupting the names to express his disagreement with the religious teaching behind them. His point, then, would be that neither Bel nor his consort Belet (or Belit) nor his son Nebo (or Nabu) could protect the life of the king. Only Yahweh, the God of Israel, could do that. It is interesting to notice that in writing his book, Daniel used his Hebrew name far more frequently than his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar.

**"Shadrach, . . . Meshach."** These two names are also theophoric; they are related to the name of the moon-god Aku. Scholars are still debating their meaning.

**"Abednego."** The Babylonian form of this name, which is frequently attested in the texts, is Ardi-Nabu. The first element of this name as given in Daniel corresponds to a common Semitic word, *'ebed*, "a servant." The second element is more problematic. It can be translated as "shiny one," but this is somewhat forced. More com-

mon in Babylon were names based on the name of the god Nebo (or Nabu). In that case, the meaning of the name *Abednego* would have been "the servant of Nebo." This is another case of the intentional distortion of a name with the purpose of giving an early indication that the young men in Babylon tried to resist the surrounding idolatrous influence.<sup>42</sup>

**1:8 "Resolved."** The Hebrew verb *šim* means "to place" or "to appoint." It is used here in the same form as in verse 7. Thus, there is a wordplay on this verb in the two verses. Verse 7 begins by stating that the chief official *yāšem*—"set" or "determined"—the new names for the young men. Beginning with the same verb, verse 8 says that Daniel *yāšem*—"set" or "determined"—in his mind *not* to defile himself.

The original text has here the additional words *'al-libbô*, "upon his heart." In the Hebrew culture, the heart was the seat of the will and intelligence of a person, meaning much the same as the word *mind* in our culture.

**"Defile himself."** In the Bible, the Hebrew root *gl*, "to defile," is associated with blood defilement (Isa. 59:3; 63:3; Lam. 4:14). Used mostly by biblical prophets, the word speaks of an act of becoming impure. In this verse, it is used twice—once in the beginning and once at the very end.

As to why the young men decided to abstain from the rich royal food, scholars have put forward three proposals: dietary, political, and religious. The dietary reason had to do with the Mosaic prohibition against eating unclean animals and eating clean animals whose blood was not drained when slaughtered. The political reason had to do with the culture of the Bible: Eating with a person meant making an alliance or a

covenant with that person. The religious reason may have been belief of the four Hebrews that no earthly king but only the God in heaven should be given credit for one's success in life. According to the teaching of the biblical wisdom books, knowledge and wisdom are gifts that the Creator God has given to the people who love him and obey his instructions. It has already been observed (see the *Notes* on Dan. 1:5) that the term **choice food** is consistently followed by the words "the king" to stress the fact that the king provided for the young men's needs while they were in training. In other words, the young men were made "the king's pensioners."<sup>43</sup>

**"The royal choice food and wine."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:5.

**"The chief official."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:3 and 1:7. The Hebrew term *śar hassārîsîm*, "the chief official," that is used in this verse is the same as in 1:7.

**1:9 "God has given."** In the original, this verse begins with the verb *wayyittēn*, "and he [God] gave." See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:2. This is the second of the three occurrences of the verb *nātan*, "he gave," in this chapter, informing the reader that God was in full control of the events in Daniel's life. Thus, the Hebrew text says that God gave Daniel favor and sympathy in the sight of the royal official, making him the object of mercy and grace before Ashpenaz.

**"Favor and compassion."** The combination of these two words that also mean "grace and compassion" is common in biblical prophets (Jer. 16:5; Hos. 2:19; Zech. 7:9). The first word, *hesed*, "grace," is difficult to translate by a single English term because it is so rich in meaning. Often rendered as "loving kindness" or "steadfast love," in

the Old Testament it is one of the key words in the covenant between God and Israel. Interestingly, this word is also used in the story of Joseph to show that he enjoyed the "grace" of the prison guard because God was with him (Gen. 39:21). It is also used of God's leading of the people of Israel from Egypt to Canaan (Exod. 15:13). The second word, *rahmîm*, "compassion," is related to the Hebrew word for "womb," considered in Bible times to be the seat of a person's deep emotion. Hence some render it as "tender love."

**"The chief official."** The original Hebrew says *śar hassārîsîm*, "the chief official." See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:3 and 1:7.

**1:10 "The chief official."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:9.

**"I am afraid."** The verbal root *yr'*, "to fear, to respect," is used here as a participle. It is common in the Bible. It does not express an action but a state of being, belonging to the group of *stative* verbs.

**"My lord."** The title *'adônāy*, "my lord," is based on the same root and is very similar in form to the word "the Lord" in 1:2. The subject in this verse, however, is clearly the king.

**"Food and drink."** In contrast to the previous terms for "choice food" and "wine" (Dan. 1:5, 8), the two words used here were general words commonly used in Bible times for food and drink.

**"Why should he see?"** It has been suggested that this phrase in Hebrew has the force of an emphatic denial, saying something like "he must not indeed see" (cf. Gen. 47:15, 19; 2 Chron. 32:4; Ezra 7:23).<sup>44</sup>

**"Looking worse."** Literally, the original says "your face looking sad," culturally assuming that

a person's face betrays the innermost feelings.

**"Young men."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:4.

**1:11 "The guard."** The young Daniel enjoyed the confidence of a lower-ranking official, whose title was *hammelšar*, "the keeper" or "the guard." Just as Ashpenaz, the chief official, had been "appointed" by the king (Dan. 1:10), this man was "appointed" by the chief official and was his subordinate. He agreed to take a risk in order to do the young men a favor. Some have suggested that in the process, this man may have profited from the situation. "With the connivance of the chief eunuch he evidently substituted his own meals for the royal delicacies and benefited from the exchange, a point which ensured the secret would be kept."<sup>45</sup>

**"Over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah."** The young men's Hebrew names are preferred over the Babylonian names because the context here speaks of their attempts to resist the influences that went against their principles.

**1:12 "Your servants."** This expression, based on the root *'bd*, "to serve," was a standard form of a person's act of willing submission to a superior human (Gen. 32:4; 50:18) or a divine being (Ezra 5:11; Luke 1:38). It is commonly attested in the Bible and contrasted with the word *'dônāy*, "my lord/master." See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:10.

**"Ten days."** The word "ten" is used here as a rounded-off number for the duration of a short test. It should be taken as a literal not a symbolic number because of the narrative genre in the story. For a similar use of "ten days of testing," see Revelation 2:10. Also, for the use of the number ten as a standard round number, see Genesis 24:55; 31:7; Numbers 14:22; Nehemiah 4:12; Job 19:3; Daniel 7:7; and Zechariah 8:23.

**"Vegetables . . . water."** A more precise meaning of the Hebrew term for *hazzērō'im*, "the vegetables," is "seeds," or better, "grains" or "cereals." It possibly includes seed-bearing plants or the plant food that grows from seeds. Its mention here with plain water takes the reader back to the Genesis Creation story, in which God prescribed the ideal human diet before the Fall: fruit, seeds, and water (Gen. 1:29). This reveals an old type of wisdom that considers a "close connection between plain living and high thinking."<sup>46</sup> In the Bible, meat and wine were foods of festivity (Isa. 22:13) and a symbol of the power of the wealthy. Although some scholars have in the past attributed the young men's choice of food to asceticism, this is improbable because Daniel 10:3 implies that at least in Daniel's case, "the diet of vegetables was a temporary regimen."<sup>47</sup>

**1:13 "The young men."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:4.

**"The royal food."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:5. For the use of a more general term for food, see the *Notes* on Daniel 1:10.

**"Your servants."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:12.

**1:14 "Ten days."** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:12.

**1:15 "Better nourished."** Literally, the original text says "fatter in flesh." This expression was an idiom in Bible times that pictured a healthy and good-looking person as stout and plump. At this point of the story, there may be a note of irony based on a possible wordplay. Even though, during the period of testing, the young men were on a plain diet, at the end of this period, their *bāsār*, "flesh," turned out to be "fatter" than that of the rest of the youth, who ate the rich

royal food based on *bāsār*, “animal flesh” (cf. Dan. 10:3).

**1:16 “The guard.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:11.

**“Choice food.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:5.

**“Vegetables.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:12.

### *Exposition (1:6-16)*

**1:6** In the Bible, a person’s name often commemorated an important event that took place either at birth or at a turning point in the person’s life. At the same time, a name might have simply expressed a wish or a condensed prayer to God from the child’s parents. The Hebrew names given to the four young men at their births all contain divine names: *El*, “God,” in the case of *Daniel* and *Misrael*, and *Yah[weh]*, “the LORD,” in the names of *Hananiah* and *Azariah*. For this reason, they are called theophoric.

No information is given about the families from which the four Hebrew youth came. As scholars have observed, “Of our protagonist Daniel no ancestry is noted,”<sup>48</sup> and “contrary to the usual Hebrew custom, no patronymics are given.”<sup>49</sup> In the story of Moses’ birth, this great leader of God’s people is introduced in a similar way in order not to distract attention from God, the true Savior of his people (Exod. 2).

It has been suggested that the Hebrew names “connote devout parents. This perhaps explains why these, in contrast to the other young men, are found

true to God; they had godly homes in their earlier years.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, the fact that all four names are also attested in the book of Nehemiah (8:4; 10:2, 6, 23) shows that these names were common among the Jews around the time of the exile. Daniel’s name means “God is my judge,” and it is given first in the text because he was the leader of the group. The name *Hananiah* means “the LORD is merciful,” while *Azariah* means “the LORD has helped.” In contrast to these three, the meaning of the name *Misrael* is not very clear unless it is understood as a variation of Michael (“Who is like God!”). Mention of Daniel’s friends at this early point in the book prepares the reader for the story of the fiery furnace in chapter 3.

**1:7** From the structure of this chapter suggested above, one can see that the testing of the young men’s faith and their resistance to a pagan culture forms the longest part of the chapter. Their resistance begins with the giving of the Babylonian names. Some scholars have suggested that these new names were given in addition to, not in lieu of, the Hebrew names. Others have argued that “the renaming of the foreigners was a matter of convenience rather than of ideology.”<sup>51</sup> This is to say that “the Babylonians simply wanted to give these captives names which would be easy to recognize by the Babylonians with whom they would be working.”<sup>52</sup> This is possible in the case of Esther, whose He-

brew name was Hadassah (Hebrew for “Myrtle,” Esther 2:7), and of Mordecai (cf. Marduk?).<sup>53</sup> Joseph in Egypt was given a new name (Gen. 41:45). Yet, in that same story, the mention of Joseph’s Egyptian name serves as a good illustration of the pressure to acculturate in a foreign country.

In the context of biblical culture, the act of naming a person or changing the person’s name, is, when imposed by a master, meant “to assert one’s authority over him.”<sup>54</sup> Mention of a person’s name change evokes the experience of the patriarch Jacob (Gen. 32:28), whose name Israel is mentioned in Daniel 1:3. In fact, name changing was “a prominent sign of dependent status, thus Abram to Abraham in covenant with God (Gen 17:5); Jehoiakim [originally called Eliakim] is renamed by Pharaoh (2 Kings 23:34); and Zedekiah [originally called Mattaniah] is renamed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:17).”<sup>55</sup> And the acceptance of a foreign name may have implied the recipient’s readiness to serve foreign masters and gods rather than the God of Israel. Elsewhere in the Bible, two Judeans who lived at the time of the return from exile bore Babylonian names: Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar (Ezra 2:2; 5:16).

It is important to note that the Babylonian names given to the young men are also theophoric. Unlike the Hebrew names, which spoke of the true God, the Babylonian names contain names of

Babylon’s pagan gods. The giving of these *new names* implied a new allegiance, and that was what the young men tried to resist. This was most probably the main reason why “the foreign names of the four youths sound utterly nonsensical in Hebrew.”<sup>56</sup> A number of scholars believe that the young men’s Babylonian names were intentionally corrupted. In fact, one scholar argues that “all the Babylonian names in MT [the Hebrew Masoretic Text] may be deliberately corrupted forms of names extolling pagan gods,”<sup>57</sup> and this may apply even to the spelling of the name of King Nebuchadnezzar. The author is most likely showing how in the names of the young men, “the Babylonian gods lose their own identity. Through such a linguistic sleight of hand the author of the book of Daniel, as well as the bearers of the names themselves, express resistance to what was happening.”<sup>58</sup>

Daniel’s new name as given by Ashpenaz was most likely Belshazzar—the same name as the later king, and a name that was common in Babylon (chap. 5). In the case of Daniel, however, this new name was intentionally altered to *Belteshazzar*, because the name *Belshazzar* was a prayer to the god Bel to protect the king’s life. Needless to say, Daniel and his friends believed it was Yahweh and not the god Bel who could protect the life of the king. In a similar way, the name *Abednego* makes no (religious) sense because of its faulty spelling. The

original name as given by Ashpenaz was probably *Abednebo* meaning “the servant of the god Nebo (or Nabu),” but most likely it was purposely altered to *Abednego* because Azariah was still the servant of the God of Israel. These are some of the examples of “deliberate corruption [in order] to heighten the gross paganism of foreign theophoric names which replaced the Israelite theophoric ones.”<sup>59</sup> The corrupted forms of the new Babylonian names are all “grotesque, silly names, which make fun of the gods whom they are supposed to honor.”<sup>60</sup>

**1:8** The young men carry their resistance to the influence of Babylonian religion and culture even further through their decision not to eat *the choice food* served to royalty and to the others who ate at *the king’s table*. A wordplay is found in verses 7 and 8, both of which begin with the same word in Hebrew. Just as Ashpenaz, the chief official of the king, “determined” the new names for the young men, so, in the same way, Daniel “determined” in his heart *not to defile himself by the royal choice food*. The command to eat the food from the royal table was a test of faith similar to Joseph’s test of character in Potiphar’s house (Gen. 39).

Commentators have advanced several suggestions as to why Daniel and his three Hebrew friends considered eating the royal food served in the palace in Babylon defiling. These suggestions may be considered complementary to each

other rather than mutually exclusive because the Hebrew concept of life and spirituality was wholistic rather than analytical. We may group the suggested reasons in the following three categories:

1. **Dietary:** Certain types of meat proscribed by the Bible, such as pork (Lev. 11; Deut. 14), were served to the officials in Babylon. Babylonian soldiers regularly ate pork and horse meat while in service for the king.<sup>61</sup> And the original Hebrew word that is translated in this verse as *defile* is associated with blood defilement in the Bible (Isa. 59:3; 63:3; Lam. 4:14). The eating of any kind of animal, clean or unclean, that hadn’t been slaughtered in such a way as to drain its blood would defile a Hebrew person (Lev. 17:10-14). The prohibition, “You must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it” (Gen. 9:4), is very old and categorically echoed many times in the Pentateuch. In Babylon, the blood was not drained when an animal was slaughtered for consumption, so defilement by blood was virtually unavoidable. The presence on the menu of pork together with meat defiled by blood posed a serious problem for the Hebrew young men.

As for the wine that is mentioned in this verse, in Bible times, only the Nazirites practiced total abstinence from grape juice, both fermented and nonfermented (Num. 6:3). There are several passages, found mostly in the wisdom

books, that speak of drinking in very negative terms: For example, “wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; / whoever is led astray by them is not wise” (Prov. 20:1). The story of the Recabites from Jeremiah 35 may also shed some light on Daniel’s refusal to drink the wine from the king’s table.

2. **Political:** In the ancient world, eating at the same table with someone meant establishing a strong bond with that person. A number of biblical examples illustrate the widely held concept that to share table fellowship with a person meant one’s readiness to make a covenant with that person or a pledge of such complete loyalty as to become one with that person (Exod. 34:15; Dan. 11:26; Matt. 26:26-28; Luke 15:1, 2; 1 Cor. 8:7; 10:14-22; Rev. 3:20). The two passages quoted below illustrate this point:

Laban answered Jacob, “. . . Come now, let’s make a *covenant*, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us.” So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. He said to his relatives, “Gather some stones.” So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they *ate* there by the heap (Gen. 31:43-46; emphasis supplied).

Then he [Moses] took the Book of the *Covenant* and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they *ate and drank*. (Exod. 24:7-11; emphasis supplied).

At least two prophetic passages, Ezekiel 4:13 and Hosea 9:3, 4, suggest that all the food eaten in Assyria and Babylon was viewed as “defiled” and therefore “unclean,” e.g.,

Threshing floors and winepresses  
will not feed the people;  
the new wine will fail them.  
They will not remain in the Lord’s  
land;  
Ephraim will return to Egypt  
and eat unclean food in Assyria  
(Hosea 9:2-4).

The following words from Amos 7:17 imply that even living in a pagan country was defiling: “Your land will be measured and divided up, / and you yourself will die in an unclean country” (margin).

3. **Religious:** In many places in the ancient world, food and drink were sacrificed to the gods before the meal. A secular slaughtering of animals for consumption was rare.<sup>62</sup> Meat was usually served from animals offered in a sacrifice to a god. In the Bible, the very act of eating had strong religious connotations—something well illustrated by the fact that every meal was preceded by a thanksgiving prayer. The following verse contains an invitation from Jesus Christ to become one with him through the act of partaking together in common meal: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and *eat* with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20; emphasis supplied).

Since the ancient city of Babylon was an important religious center, the food and drink available there would have come from the temple, where we may assume that some kind of pagan sacrificial ritual was carried out before and even after each meal. This concept is also implied in the Hebrew word used in this chapter to describe *the choice food* served at the king’s table.

Although some students of Daniel would say that the problem of eating foods sacrificed to idols is a New Testament issue, a careful reading of the biblical prophets shows that it was a concern in Old Testament times as well. Leviticus 11:44 shows a strong link between food and holiness: “I am the LORD

your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground.” Daniel 1 “does not, in fact, give any explicit reason for Daniel’s rejection of the delicacies. What the narrative does say clearly and repeatedly, though, is that the delicacies and wine are from the king (vv. 5, 8, 13, 15, 16).”<sup>63</sup> In this case, to eat from the king’s table meant “a pledge of loyalty to the king instead of remaining loyal to and dependent on God.”<sup>64</sup>

The young Hebrews regarded the supreme God as the source of wisdom. Their concept of life as well as their success in life depended on God the Creator and the Giver of all things. “If they prosper, then to whom should they attribute their development and success?”<sup>65</sup> For that reason, they chose to rely on him rather than on either the king’s generosity or on the ability of a pagan idol to impart wisdom. Their choice of a diet consisting of *vegetables*—literally, “seeds”—and *water* (Gen. 1:29) showed their pledge of loyalty to the Creator and Sustainer, the One who, in the case of their successful training, should receive full credit and praise. Several passages from biblical wisdom books claim that the Creator God is the source of true wisdom (Ps. 104:24; Prov. 8:22-27; Jer. 10:10-12).<sup>66</sup>

The example of the young men is “a symbolic denial of the king’s implicit

claim to be sole provider.”<sup>67</sup> At the end of the story, “the king could take pride in the products of his largess. Only the Judean youths knew the truth.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, at this point in the story, the stage is set for the God of the Hebrews to triumph over the Babylonian pantheon. The young men triumphed thanks to God’s providence and not to the king’s. In fact, as the last verse of the chapter shows, Daniel himself outlasted Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian successors.

It is important to note that the young men’s attitude toward *the royal choice food* may have been exceptional among the Judean captives. Second Kings 25:29 says that “for the rest of his life,” King Jehoiachin “ate regularly at the king’s table.” In contrast with him and other members of Judah’s nobility, Daniel and his friends considered this issue to be a test of their faith. Daniel’s stay in Babylon was characterized by a consistent prayer life. The four Hebrews took seriously the word from Deuteronomy 8:3 that says, “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>69</sup> Although the food was fit for a king, “in Daniel’s judgment it was not fit for a servant of the King of kings.”<sup>70</sup>

**1:9, 10** According to the stories in his book, Daniel’s attitude in Babylon was consistently positive and circumspect. His life was characterized by active involvement combined with distinctiveness. First of all, he enjoyed the

trust and favor of his superior, much as did Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 39:4, 21) and Ezra (Ezra 7:28) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:8) in Persia. While he did not adopt a confrontational approach, neither was he ready to assimilate the new culture and religion. He demonstrated a definite sense of direction in life but was extremely prudent. When Ashpenaz expressed his feelings of fear, Daniel did not exert any pressure on him. He believed that his Lord was more powerful than the lord of the chief official.

Yet, the narrator makes clear that Daniel’s circumspect behavior was not what gained him the favors of his superiors. Rather, it was God who granted him *favor and compassion in the sight of the king’s chief official*. In his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem, King Solomon asked God for forgiveness of Israel’s future sins and also to “cause their conquerors to show them mercy” (1 Kings 8:50). That is what God did in this case because “He caused them [Israel] to be pitied by all who held them captive” (Ps. 106:46). “The God of judgment is paradoxically, also the God of grace.”<sup>71</sup>

**1:11-14** Daniel now turns to a lower ranking official, one who is called *the guard*, who had been *appointed* by Ashpenaz. He simply suggests, “*Please test your servants for ten days*” (1:12). It is amazing to see again in the text the absence of any sort of pressure in Daniel’s dealing with the royal officer. The

ten-day period of testing Daniel proposed was short enough not to arouse suspicion yet long enough to reveal the effects of the new diet. Daniel continued, *“Then compare our appearance . . . and deal with your servants in accordance with what you see”* (Dan. 1:13). He could say this because he considered his God to be in full control of the events in his life.

The diet Daniel requested consisted of plant food that grows from seeds. Fruits, cereals, and water form the ideal diet given by the Creator God: “Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food’ ” (Gen. 1:29). This simple diet on which Daniel and his friends subsisted “during their entire course of training”<sup>72</sup> was a form of half-fast. We do know that as far as Daniel is concerned, “the diet of vegetables was a temporary regimen.”<sup>73</sup> After the three years of training, during which time the food was not served from the king’s table, he reverted back to regular food—except for periods during which, he says, “‘I ate no choice food; no meat or wine entered my mouth’ ” (Dan. 10:3).

**1:15, 16** Instead of deteriorating, the young men’s physical and intellectual condition improved. They turned out to be “fatter in flesh”—that is, *healthier and better* looking—than the rest of the young men at the palace. In this section, a foretaste of the young men’s complete

triumph in Babylon is given: They are described as *healthier and better nourished than all of the young men who ate the royal food* (Dan. 1:15).

### Triumph (1:17-21)

Daniel’s God turned the defeat of his people into a triumph of the faithful remnant in Babylon. Thus he demonstrated that he is the only true source of wisdom and power.

*<sup>17</sup>To 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.*

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

*<sup>21</sup>And Daniel remained (there) until the first year of King Cyrus.*

### Notes

**1:17 “Young men.”** See the Notes on Daniel 1:4.

**“God gave.”** This is the third and the last occurrence of this form of the verb *nātan*, “he gave,” in this chapter. (It is also used in vv. 2 and 9.) Here, again, it points to God’s full control over the events described in the story, and it stands in contrast to the official’s act of *nātan*,

“giving,” the food and drink to the young men (vv. 12 and 16).

**“Knowledge, understanding . . . and learning.”** Three different Hebrew words for knowledge and wisdom are used here synonymously.

**“Literature.”** The Hebrew word *seper*, “scroll” or “a writing,” is also used in verse 4 of this chapter. That verse says that the young men were to learn “the language and literature of the Babylonians.”

**“Visions and dreams.”** The word *ḥāzôn*, “vision,” occurs more than thirty times in Daniel’s book. Sometimes it is distinguished from the word *ḥlōm*, “dream,” since during a vision the receptor is fully awake, unlike in a dream, during which he is in a state of sleep. In this case, however, the two terms are used interchangeably. While the first noun is given in the singular in this verse, the second is in the plural.

In the ancient world, dreams were believed to be a customary way in which the divine world communicated with humans. In Babylon particularly, where wisdom was highly valued, dreams and their interpretations were considered to be a main source of knowledge, and they were therefore highly prized. The statement that Daniel **could understand visions and dreams of all kinds** foreshadows his active role in the story of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream found in chapter 2.

**1:18 “At the end of the time.”** The original Hebrew says *ûl-miqṣāt hayyāmîm*, “and at the end of the days,” a statement that is very similar to the one that opens verse 15 (“at the end of the ten days”), even though a different time period is meant here—the three years of training of verse 5.

**“The chief official.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:3 and 1:7.

**1:19 “The king talked with them.”** The king himself presided over the final examination of the young trainees. In this way he could personally witness the extraordinary wisdom demonstrated by the four Hebrews. This observation prepares the way for the story in chapter 2, in which the king personally addresses his wise men, demanding that they answer his question.

**“None was found.”** The original Hebrew says *wlō’ nimṣā’ mikkullām*, “and none was found among them all,” informing the reader that this contest involved numerous participants who came from various lands conquered by the Babylonians that were now part of the empire (v. 20). See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:3 and 1:6.

**“Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.”** Once again (as in v. 11), the young men’s Hebrew names are preferred over the Babylonian. This is to teach that God, whose name was exalted by the young men’s names, should be given full credit for their outstanding success.

**“They entered the king’s service.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:5. This statement harmonizes with the king’s plan outlined in verse 5 of this chapter: “They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to enter the king’s service.”

**1:20 “Wisdom and understanding.”** The two nouns are found in a construct relationship in the original Hebrew; hence the expression *ḥokmat binâ* can be rendered as “wisdom of discernment.”

**“The king consulted them.”** See the *Notes* on Daniel 1:19.

**“Ten times.”** The Hebrew word *yādôt*, “times,” is in the plural. It literally means “hands.” It is also used in Genesis 43:34, which says, “Ben-

jamin's portion [on the table] was five times ["five hands"] as much as anyone else's." This rounding off of the number has possible hyperbolic overtones, meaning "infinitely better" (Gen. 31:41; Num. 14:22; Neh. 4:12). From the literary point of view, the use of the number ten here balances its previous mention in the story. In verse 12, the same number designated the number of days during which the impact of the young men's plain diet was tested. The statement here certainly "evokes wonder"<sup>74</sup> on behalf of the Babylonians.

**"Magicians."** The word *haḥarṭummîm*, "magicians," is used in the Bible to describe the magicians in Egypt (Gen. 41:8, 24; Exod. 7:11). The four young men whose source of wisdom was God are contrasted with the rest of the Babylonian wisdom elite, who relied on the practices of magic and enchanting to acquire knowledge.

**1:21 "The first year of King Cyrus."** The name *Cyrus* (Hebrew *kôrêš*, Elamite *kuraš*, Old Persian *kuruš*, Greek *Kyros*) may have been a throne name or a dynastic royal title. King Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great, was the founder of the Medo-Persian Empire. Following a rather complicated situation surrounding the fall of the Babylonian Empire, Cyrus's official title in Babylon was "Ruler of the Lands." In this text, the first year of Cyrus means 539 B.C., the year during which Babylon fell into the hands of the Medo-Persians. That same year marked the end of the Babylonian exile (2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1-4). It is probable that after the fall of Babylon, Daniel moved his residence to the Persian city of Susa and eventually died and was buried there.<sup>75</sup> According to an old thesis, chapter 1 of Daniel was not written until the first year of Cyrus.<sup>76</sup> On the

other hand, it is possible that this dateline was added during the early days of the Medo-Persian Empire.

### *Expositton (1:17-21)*

**1:17** The last part of the chapter presents the results of the young men's three-year study in Babylon and of their trust in God. This verse says that God gave them outstanding success. The same God who had "given" Jerusalem and its king into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (v. 2) and the same God who had previously "given" favor and sympathy to Daniel before the king's official (v. 9) is the One who *gave knowledge and understanding* to the young Hebrews. This shows how "even in the land of Shinar, the infamous place of wickedness, God is at work and even providing."<sup>77</sup> Among the Babylonians, wisdom was the ultimate goal to achieve, whether in one's life or in one's academic career. Marduk, or Bel, the patron god of the city of Babylon, was the god of wisdom. But the Hebrew young men believed that only the Creator God could dispense wisdom. The One who is the source of virtues such as wisdom is of prime importance, not the virtues themselves. In the same way, learning is not an end in itself; it increases a person's knowledge of God and his work. Here one recalls a famous line by the Jewish writer Abraham Joshua Heschel: "The Greeks learned in order to understand, the Hebrews learned in order to revere!"

Among the four Hebrews, Daniel excelled because God gave him the ability to interpret *visions and dreams of all kinds*. If wisdom was a highly priced virtue in Babylon, the ability to explain dreams was supreme there. In fact, the topic of *visions and dreams* was the favorite field of study among the Babylonians. In the Bible, on the other hand, God speaks through dreams (Gen. 28:10-22; 1 Kings 3:5) but not through the other forms of divination that the Babylonians practiced. “Dream interpretation is one mode of divine revelation understood by Babylonians and accepted by pious Israelites.”<sup>78</sup> Divine wisdom meets people where they are.<sup>79</sup> It was not a mere coincidence that “of all the various divinatory ‘techniques’ used in the ANE [Ancient Near East], only dreams and dream interpretations find an acceptable place within orthodox Hebrew religion.”<sup>80</sup>

The statement about Daniel given here prepares the reader for the rest of the stories in the book, in which Daniel exhibits this ability to interpret dreams on more than one occasion. It is best to credit his ability to interpret dreams to his life of prayer and to the revelations given to him by God. This prepared him for the role that he assumed later as described in the story in chapter 2. It has been correctly observed that “with the possible exceptions of Moses (Acts 7:22) and Solomon, Daniel was the most learned man in the Old Testament.”<sup>81</sup>

**1:18-20** The high point of the final examination, following the three years of training, was an interview with the king himself, whose questions included riddles and difficult problems. The monarch was personally present to witness the extraordinary knowledge of the young men. Their Hebrew names are given here rather than their Babylonian names in order to highlight the triumph of their God. Azariah’s name is mentioned last, reminding the reader that “Yahweh has helped” all four of them to accomplish this outstanding success. They had excelled in fields of knowledge that were characteristically Gentile, not Jewish.

Through a somewhat hyperbolic expression, *ten times superior*, the author draws a sharp line between those who trusted Yahweh and his teaching and the others whose success in Babylon was credited to helpless idols. In fact, “Daniel and his associates are compared not only with the other young men who received the same training as they did (verse 19) but also with professional advisors to the king who were already at work in Babylonia.”<sup>82</sup> The successful passing of the examination gave the young men the privilege of serving in the royal palace and becoming members of the group of Babylonian wise men. The text is not explicit on whether the four Hebrews openly talked about their God during the questioning. But the insistence of

the book's author on Yahweh's powerful presence in the lives of these young men as well as their presence at the palace all pave the way for their future witnessing in Babylon and the confrontations that this activity unavoidably entails.

**1:21** The closing verse in this chapter says that *Daniel remained* in the royal palace in Babylon *until the first year of King Cyrus*. Two fragmentary texts may throw light on Daniel's high position in Babylon subsequent to King Nebuchadnezzar's reign. One tablet bearing a cuneiform text dates to the second year of Amel-Marduk, while the other one dates to the accession year of Neriglissar. Both of these tablets mention a certain Belshazzar who occupied the position of the chief officer of the king in Babylon. It is possible that this person was none other than Daniel.<sup>83</sup>

It is almost certain that after the Medo-Persian conquest of Babylon, Daniel, whose age at this time was between eighty-five and ninety, moved eastward and settled in a Persian city, in all likelihood Susa (or Shushan). Josephus says that Daniel finished his career in Susa,<sup>84</sup> and ancient traditions claim that the prophet died and was buried in this city. That is why the text specifies that he stayed in the palace in Babylon *until the first year of King Cyrus*. The presence of many Persian loanwords in the book leads to the conclusion that Daniel's book was either written or at

least edited in the early period of the Medo-Persian Empire.

In addition to this fact, a number of scholars have seen, and rightly so, a deeper meaning in this statement—one that sets the perspective for all that follows in the book. This verse implies that the exile to Babylon cannot go on forever. Daniel lives on to see Babylon's fall. In fact, he outlasts his conquerors. The triumph of the Hebrews at the beginning of the exile was an important sign to remind their people of the prophetic announcements that said Babylon's end would usher in the time of their return home. For the faithful remnant, this would be a new exodus. Just as God's triumph over the gods of Egypt centuries earlier was a sure sign that Israel's slavery had come to an end (Exod. 12:12), so his triumph in the case of the four faithful youths indicated that his people's exile in Babylon would someday end too.

So, this chapter opens with the mention of a defeat of a Judean ruler by a triumphant Babylonian king, and closes with an allusion to the future triumph of someone who was "anointed" by God to be his shepherd and to say to Babylon's "watery deep, 'Be dry!'" and "of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the temple, 'Let its foundation be laid'" (Isa. 44:26-28). In this way, the end of chapter 1 anticipates the fulfillment of the words spoken through Moses that describe a future time when "the LORD

your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers” (Deut. 30:3-5).

### Summary of the Teaching

1. *God is in control.* From the beginning to the end of this chapter, the reader can clearly see that God is in charge of the events in life—even when pagan Babylon conquered the holy land of Judah. It has already been observed that three times in the story, in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, the key expression “God gave” is found in the original text:

1. The Lord *gave* Jehoiakim and the holy articles to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:2).
2. God *gave* favor and sympathy to Daniel before the chief official (Dan. 1:9).
3. God *gave* knowledge and understanding to the four young men (Dan. 1:17).

The expression “God gave” has been called “the gospel of this chapter”<sup>85</sup> and

“a key perspective in the book of Daniel.”<sup>86</sup> At this point in the book, “Daniel offers no answer to the question ‘Why are we here in exile?’”<sup>87</sup> He does that later, in chapter 9. Instead of providing here an intellectual answer to this question, he focuses on the practical aspect of the life in exile. In spite of the appearances that may point to the contrary, Yahweh is in full control over the events in history and over the day-to-day activities of the faithful believers. “Only the eye of faith could perceive God at work here.”<sup>88</sup> But the truth that God is in full control does not leave human beings in a passive role—in a sort of iron-firm deterministic or fatalistic position. “Divine aid (v 9) does not mean there is no need for the exercise of human responsibility and initiative (v 11): rather it opens the way to it.”<sup>89</sup> “Great favors presuppose great faithfulness.”<sup>90</sup>

Living in a cross-cultural setting, Daniel and his friends learned what it means to be torn apart by the tension between the attitudes of assimilation and separatism, of being *in* the world but not of it (John 17:11-16). In spite of all they faced, they were brave enough to stand for their principles. It has been observed that “the relationship between faith and culture is a question which runs through the O[ld] T[estament].”<sup>91</sup> In this story, we see Daniel actively involved and working with God in the context of the divine plan. He risked his own head when he decided not to eat

from the king's table. Fidelity comes before survival.<sup>92</sup> "For Joseph in Egypt, resistance to the temptation of his master's wife was a matter of principle, a 'statement' of who he was. For Daniel, the resistance to the temptation of the king's pleasurable delicacies and wine was a 'statement' of who he was."<sup>93</sup> Both men "serve as models for godly behavior to God's people who live in a foreign culture."<sup>94</sup>

The following list shows a number of parallels between the lives, tests, and triumphs of Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon:

- Both were led to foreign lands (Egypt, Babylon).
- Both were handsome (Gen. 39:6; Dan. 1:4).
- The faith of both was tested (Gen. 39:7-12; Dan. 1:14-16).
- God showed favor to both before their overseers (Gen. 39:21; Dan. 1:9).
- Both were given foreign names (Gen. 41:45; Dan. 1:7).
- Both could interpret dreams (Gen. 41:15; Dan. 1:17).
- Both outperformed all the wise men (Gen. 41:38; Dan. 1:20).
- Both were promoted to serve as a king's "ruler" (Gen. 41:41-44; Dan. 2:48).

Saadya, a famous Jewish interpreter, argued that Daniel's resolution not to

defile himself was due to his regular and devout reading of the "Shema," which says, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4).<sup>95</sup> "An exiled Jew can be a winner because the God of Israel is a winner!"<sup>96</sup>

According to the story in Daniel 1, God does not just work *for* his people; rather, he works *with* them. He acts like the true Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). "Daniel and his companions represent the godly remnant of Israel which preserved the testimony of God even in dark hours of apostasy and divine judgment."<sup>97</sup> A precious lesson that they learned—also demonstrated later in Christ's temptation—was that the cross comes *before* the crown. As the ancient Romans liked to say: "*Per aspera ad astra*"—"through suffering to glory!" (Literally, "through thorns to the stars.") The four Hebrews were able to "gain wisdom and prestige without losing holiness."<sup>98</sup> They were destined "to be a covenant for the people / and a light for the Gentiles" (Isa. 42:6).

2. *Wisdom comes from God.* In the Bible, wisdom is a spiritual and ethical virtue, not just a natural outcome of one's hard work. It is a gift from God. As such, wisdom, along with all the other virtues, is not self-serving but points to its divine source. True wisdom is not blended with mere intellectual curiosity but with deep trust in God's leading. "Society often judges the person of faith as intellectually weak, and science does

not easily accommodate itself with simplistic biblical explanations.”<sup>99</sup> Yet, both faith and wisdom are divine gifts. Respect for God, who holds the first place in a believer’s life, is the beginning of wisdom. Job 28:28 says, “The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, / and to shun evil is understanding.” Biblical wisdom books, such as Psalms and Proverbs, call a righteous person “wise,” while the wicked is considered a “fool.”

Jesus Christ did not separate faith from wisdom. According to him, it is “a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24), and it was the wise bridesmaids who were ready for the coming of the bridegroom (Matt. 25:10). The concept of “spiritual wisdom” is one of the key themes in Daniel’s book. There are strong links in the second half of the book between wisdom and the apocalyptic visions that portray spiritual warfare. Lastly, the book of Daniel, just like the rest of the Bible, teaches that at its foundation, wisdom is not a lesson to be learned as much as it is a relationship to be enjoyed (Prov. 8:17).<sup>100</sup>

3. *The book’s message in a nutshell.* The story in this chapter is built on a clear reversal or an adverse change of fortune<sup>101</sup> because it begins with the king of Babylon and ends with the king of Medo-Persia. The king who is the great liberator takes the place of the king invader. This chapter, in fact, “contains a condensation of all the basic messages”

of the book of Daniel.<sup>102</sup> Rather than being defeated by a foreign god, Yahweh, the God of Israel, has triumphed through his faithful servants on Marduk’s own ground, which was wisdom. The Hebrew young men demonstrated a kind of wisdom that was much superior to that of all the Babylonian and non-Babylonian wise men.

The success of Daniel and his friends in Babylon was nothing short of a miracle. They attained positions of leadership in Babylon not through military or political means but through God-given wisdom. Based on the triumph of the faithful remnant in Babylon, the reader can already anticipate all the future victories of God in the world. Daniel’s experience in Babylon is primarily a story of providence, not just of success.<sup>103</sup> What is success, if not a gift from God? This is the good news that becomes the source of hope to the oppressed people of God in all times and places:

But as for me, I watch in hope for  
the LORD,  
I wait for God my Savior;  
my God will hear me.  
Do not gloat over me, my enemy!  
Though I have fallen, I will rise.  
Though I sit in darkness,  
the LORD will be my light  
(Micah 7:7, 8).

Success is not a destination, it is a journey. The story of Daniel and his

friends “has continued for generations to edify people, not only about the possibility of living faithfully amid the messiness of human history, but especially about the mysterious and quiet working out of the sovereign God’s will in that history.”<sup>104</sup>

1. John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 29.

2. Collins, 129.

3. Towner, 21.

4. Ford, 75.

5. C. L. Seow, *Daniel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 21.

6. Wiseman corrected his initial reading of this name to Hamath, or northern Syria (see *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, 17, note 113).

7. Donald J. Wiseman, ed., *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings* (London: The British Museum, 1956), 69.

8. Nichol, 4:756. Josephus (*Antiquities* 10.11.1) says that when Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon, “he found that the public affairs had been managed by the Chaldeans, and that the principal persons among them had preserved the kingdom for him.”

9. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar*, 23.

10. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET)*, 3rd edition with supplement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 308. See also *Biblical Archaeologist* 5 (1942): 49-55.

11. Lucas, 46.

12. *Ibid.*, 52.

13. John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 15.

14. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “The Book of Daniel,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 7:38.

15. Goldingay, 21.

16. Doukhan, *Secrets*, 13.

17. Zdravko Stefanovic, “Daniel: A Book of Significant Reversals,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 30 (1992): 140.

18. Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 23.

19. Walvoord, 30.

20. Deuteronomy 23:1 says that no castrated person “may enter the assembly of the Lord.” It is widely held that Nehemiah was a eunuch.

21. Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 129.

22. See Zdravko Stefanovic, “The Use of the Aramaic Word *bār* (‘son’) as a Noun of Relation in the Book of Daniel,” *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies* 6 (2003): 77-81.

23. Lucas, 52.

24. Doukhan, *Secrets*, 16.

25. James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), 120.

26. Seow, 24.

27. Collins, 138.

28. Hartman and DiLella, 129; Shea, *Daniel*, 58; Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 49.

29. Collins, 138.

30. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 730.

31. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1994), 63.

32. Hartman and DiLella, 130.

33. Montgomery, 119.

34. Collins, 137.

35. Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel-Ezra-Nehemiah* (New York: Soncino Press, 1999), 20.

36. Shea, *Daniel*, 36.

37. John Day, “The Daniel of Ugarit and Ezekiel and the Hero of the Book of Daniel,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980): 361-365. Day’s conclusions are supported by Collins (p. 1) and contradict the thesis of H. H. P. Dressler, “The Identification of the Ugaritic Dnīl with the Daniel of Ezekiel,” *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (1979): 152-161.

38. This ruler is described as someone who “judges the cause of the widow, tries the case of the orphan” (Pritchard, 149-155).

39. Shea, “Bel(te)shazzar Meets Belshazzar,” *An-*

- draws University Seminary Studies* 26 (1988): 67-82. Walvoord (p. 36) claims that Daniel's Babylonian name *Belteshazzar* was identical with *Belshazzar*.
40. Lucas, 53.
  41. Seow, 24.
  42. Montgomery, 130.
  43. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 122.
  44. C. F. Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 81.
  45. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 84.
  46. Ford, 81. "A fat belly does not make a fine mind" (Montgomery, 132.)
  47. Longman, 53.
  48. Daniel Berrigan, *Daniel: Under the Siege of the Divine* (Farmington, PA: The Plough, 1998), 5.
  49. Collins, 140; also Montgomery, 123.
  50. Walvoord, 36.
  51. Baldwin, 81.
  52. Shea, *Daniel*, 39.
  53. Seow, 24.
  54. de Vaux, 46.
  55. Smith-Christopher, 39.
  56. Seow, 24.
  57. Lucas, 53.
  58. Doukhan, *Secrets*, 19.
  59. Goldingay, 5.
  60. *Ibid.*, 24.
  61. H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962), 176.
  62. René Péter-Contesse and John Ellington, *A Handbook on the Book of Daniel* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 18.
  63. Seow, 26.
  64. Péter-Contesse and Ellington, 18.
  65. Longman, 53.
  66. James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 53-58.
  67. Davies, *Daniel*, 91.
  68. Lucas, 53.
  69. Keil, 80.
  70. Towner, 28.
  71. Seow, 21.
  72. Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press®, 1943, 484.
  73. Longman, 53.
  74. Collins, 145.
  75. Montgomery, 138.
  76. Nichol, 4:764.
  77. Seow, 27.
  78. Longman, 77.
  79. Nichol, 4:767.
  80. Lucas, 70.
  81. Walvoord, 29.
  82. Péter-Contesse and Ellington, 27.
  83. Shea, "Bel(te)shazzar," 67-82.
  84. Josephus *Antiquities* 10.11.7. This is in contrast to some Jewish legends, which say that Daniel returned to Judea and became a governor there. See Ginzberg, 1118, note 20.
  85. Goldingay, 27, quoting Lüthi.
  86. Lucas, 56.
  87. Goldingay, 28.
  88. Lucas, 57.
  89. Goldingay, 26, quoting Joubert.
  90. Maxwell, 19.
  91. Goldingay, 23.
  92. Berrigan, 11.
  93. Seow, 26.
  94. Longman, 74.
  95. Slotki, 4.
  96. Towner, 27.
  97. Walvoord, 43.
  98. Goldingay, 3.
  99. Doukhan, *Secrets*, 21.
  100. Longman, 87.
  101. Z. Stefanovic, "Daniel," 139.
  102. Maxwell, 15.
  103. Berrigan, 12.
  104. Seow, 30.

6:7 ... 447

**Ephesians**

1:19-22 ... 270, 369

6:10-17 ... 394

6:12 ... 284

**1 Thessalonians**

2:16 ... 316

4-5 ... 27

5:18 ... 216

**2 Thessalonians**

2 ... 27

2:3 ... 287

2:3-10 ... 427

2:4 ... 39

**1 Timothy**

6:16 ... 94

**2 Timothy**

2:20 ... 101

3:12 ... 283

**Hebrews**

4:4-16 ... 325

8:1, 2 ... 307, 323

9:14 ... 223

9:28 ... 109

10:1-14 ... 361

11:33 ... 38, 224

11:33, 34 ... 228

11:34 ... 37, 143

12:29 ... 262, 266

**1 Peter**

1:10, 11 ... 343

1:10-12 ... 33

2:4 ... 108, 109

5:8 ... 250

**Jude**

9 ... 389

14 ... 288

**Revelation**

1:1 ... 37

1:7 ... 38, 440, 450

1:9 ... 208

1:10 ... 380

1:12-16 ... 39

1:12-18 ... 433

1:14 ... 262

1:17 ... 314

1:19 ... 37

2:10 ... 59

3:5 ... 40, 436

3:20 ... 63, 64, 408

3:21 ... 39, 261, 278, 324

4 ... 265

4:1 ... 37

5 ... 265, 269

5:5 ... 250

5:6 ... 253

5:11 ... 38

5:13 ... 128

6:1-6 ... 259

6:5 ... 196

6:11 ... 316

6:15 ... 383

6:15, 16 ... 384

7:1 ... 107, 256

7:9 ... 128

7:14 ... 40

8:7-12 ... 252

9:18 ... 252

10:5, 6 ... 443

10:11 ... 128

11:2, 3 ... 39

11:7 ... 39

12 ... 302, 305

12:3 ... 274

12:4 ... 39, 252, 259, 306, 307,  
331

12:7 ... 136, 140

12:7-9 ... 269, 386, 389

12:8 ... 37

12:11 ... 145

12:14 ... 38, 275

13 ... 145, 230, 372

13:1 ... 38, 274, 287

13:2 ... 259, 317

13:4 ... 145

13:5 ... 38

13:6 ... 39, 310

13:7 ... 39, 128

13:11 ... 39

13:11-18 ... 37

13:14, 15 ... 145

14 ... 230, 245

14:1-5 ... 145

14:6 ... 128

14:7 ... 156

14:8 ... 167, 205

14:12 ... 281

14:14 ... 38

15:1-4 ... 145

15:6 ... 382

16 ... 341, 345, 421

16:12 ... 202, 297, 414

16:19 ... 167, 252

17:8 ... 436

17:12 ... 104, 260, 287

17:12-14 ... 274

17:15 ... 128, 249, 279

18:2 ... 167

19:9 ... 105

19:10 ... 111, 313

19:16 ... 103

19:17-20:6 ... 428

19:20 ... 262, 263, 287

20:4 ... 261

20:11 ... 37, 38

20:12 ... 40, 263, 267

20:13 ... 40

20:14 ... 262

20:15 ... 40, 263

21:5 ... 105, 195

21:20 ... 382

21:27 ... 40, 436

22:6 ... 37, 105

22:8, 9 ... 11, 313

22:10 ... 40, 437, 441

22:10, 11 ... 195

22:11 ... 40, 447

22:20 ... 264