

DANIEL — WEEK 1

WHO IS GOD?



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is Daniel in the Lions' Den by Peter Paul Rubens

When Nebuchadnezzar moves the temple treasures into the temple of his God, he makes it all about who is God, instead of about his personal wealth. Good. The battle is now joined. Next, he tries to erase the captives' culture by changing their names. But their personalities are unchanged. There will be conflict.

As this conflict initiates, the so-called wise men of Babylon are exposed as phonies.

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1 Daniel 1:1–2

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.

It's not about who is king; it's about who is God.

Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judah and what does he do? Carries off the temple treasures.

Of course. Why not? They're valuable. Many of the pieces are made of gold. Even the ones that aren't gold are beautiful and precious.

But does Nebuchadnezzar do this to get these nice things for himself? Does he melt anything down for the gold? No, *he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.*

What a waste, right?

No—because it's about who is God.

This is what the Israelites get wrong, over and over, throughout the Old Testament. They fight and die over who is king.

But that's not what matters to the LORD and his prophets. Notice the similarity with how Jeremiah counseled king Zedekiah to surrender his throne.

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel: 'If you surely surrender to the king of Babylon's princes, then your soul shall live; this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the king of Babylon's princes, then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chaldeans; they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand.' " — Jeremiah 38:17–18

Zedekiah didn't take Jeremiah's advice, and great suffering ensued, but the nation did okay in the long run. Who is king doesn't matter that much.

This "it's about who is God" theme will dominate the whole book of Daniel.

It's good that Nebuchadnezzar starts off by making this about who is God. At least he's got that part right.

But he doesn't know that he's outgunned.

2 Daniel 1:3–7

Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king. Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.

Sounds like a good plan to build up the service corps. Get some of Israel's finest— *young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace.* They should also be ones *they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.* They expect to assimilate these guys into the Babylonian culture. (Ha!) So, to purge all references to the Hebrew God their names are changed.

In Hebrew Elohim means God, and Yahweh is His name. Hebrew names often end in “el” or “yah” to denote Elohim or Yahweh. Thus, “Daniel” means “God is my judge.” “Mishael” means “Who is what God is?” “Hananiah” means “Yahweh shows grace.” “Azariah” means “Yahweh helps.” Their new names include references to the Babylonian Gods but—and this is the point—no one cares.

Daniel and his friends don't object to having their names changed. These guys will show, over and over, that there are plenty of things they care about—even are willing to die for— but names aren't a big deal.

Nebuchadnezzar thinks he's starting to convert them. In reality, he's let in four Trojan horses.

Imagine sitting around a campfire and everyone's telling ghost stories. They're generally completely made up—sometimes even on the spot—though no one mentions that they're fiction. Some tales even include a lengthy claim to historical veracity. Yet no one objects. How can that be?

There's an unwritten code that says that you don't take ghost stories seriously. They're a cultural phenomenon. They're also a ton of fun, and it would be a shame if someone tried to ban or regulate them. A good ghost story would be ruined by an up-front disclaimer.

But tell a tale like that in a court of law and they'll lock you up and throw away the key. That's because court testimony isn't just for fun; it's serious.

As we walk through Daniel, we will see that this is the difference between the Babylonian religion and the Hebrew religion. Nebuchadnezzar will be surprised and then schooled by this.

He has no concept of someone taking their religion seriously.

3 Daniel 1:8–16

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs. And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who are your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king."

So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants." So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days.

And at the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies. Thus the steward took away their portion of delicacies and the wine that they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

Bang. Daniel's already throwing down. He's just fine being called Belteshazzar, but eat the king's food? No way. It's perfectly good food, the best even. What's the problem?

It's not kosher. The Torah doesn't have regulations about names, but it has plenty of regulations about what's OK to eat. Daniel isn't "flexible" on this.

And notice that Daniel has apparently picked a serious fight. The steward doesn't just think that Daniel could lose his head over this; the steward is worried that he'll lose his own head.

But Daniel isn't looking to pick a fight; his goal is just to not be defiled. So, he proposes a compromise, which should make everyone happy. It works and, at least for now, there's no conflict.

But two vastly different world views are in opposition. This is sure to come to a head.

In any conflict, the more serious side usually wins. There are some exceptions, particularly in a military conflict when one side has better weapons, but for opposing ideologies the less serious side usually folds.

This applies today. If one ideology is serious enough to include an unlimited supply of suicide bombers, while the other side is populated by couch potatoes, the outcome is rather predictable.

It doesn't matter if the couch potatoes have logic on their side.

But it can matter if the couch potatoes have better prayers,

if they're serious.

4 Daniel 1:17–21

As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

Now at the end of the days, when the king had said that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. Then the king interviewed them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they served before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm. Thus Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus.

These kids are young—much younger than *the magicians and astrologers*. The Hebrew word for child is “yellid.” The Hebrew word for adolescent is “nar.” “Yellid” is the word used to describe *Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah* in verse four. They were children when their “reeducation” began. After completing the three-year Babylonian prep school, they might be teens, but that’s all. We’re not talking about adults here.

So the contrast between these kids and *the magicians and astrologers* is all the more stark—which says more about *the magicians and astrologers* than it does about the kids. *The magicians and astrologers* are a bunch of phonies.

But we knew that already.

Even given the obvious phoniness of *the magicians and astrologers*, it’s still curious that Nebuchadnezzar valued these four kids so much more highly. If *the magicians and astrologers* were just for fun, they would be called jesters. The king takes them seriously enough to call them in on occasion.

Nebuchadnezzar deserves credit for his powers of perception, but the kids must be doing something right.

That something seems to be what we have seen already and what we will see more of later—they’re genuine. They’re different from *the magicians and astrologers* in that they aren’t phony. When *the king interviewed them*, they did well—much better than the crew he had been used to getting advice from.

I suspect there’s a psychological reason for this—they didn’t bring an agenda into their interview. They were just kids being quizzed by an adult. He’d ask a question and they’d answer it as best as they could. They may have been fresh from textbook study of the subject, or they might just be talking honestly about their feelings, or the weather, or whatever. They didn’t bring in all that “grown-up” baggage.

On the other hand, *the magicians and astrologers*, being what they are, always had an angle. Frankly, I’m hard pressed to even guess at what kind of baloney they spewed back then. Given all that, they might have been worried about losing their jobs—or even their heads.

They’re about to get a lot more worried.

5 Daniel 2:1–11 (ESV)

In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, “I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.” Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, “O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.” The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, “The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.” They answered a second time and said, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.” The king answered and said, “I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm—if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation.” The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.”

This is like the newspaper ad that read simply, “*Psychic wanted. You’ll know who to call.*”

Nebuchadnezzar’s interview with the four Hebrews has made him cynical. He’s mocking the psychics. He’s sick of their baloney and has decided to find out if any of them are legit. They know that they’re phonies, and their pleading is pathetic. “*O king, live forever!*”

Their excuses give away the game. They’re conceding that their professions mean nothing when they say, “*There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand.*”

The magic arts are not supposed to be about simple, practical wisdom such as, “A stitch in time saves nine.” They’re supposed to be about discerning things beyond normal human perception. That’s why Joseph could claim to know unseen things when he said, “*What deed is this that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me can indeed practice divination?*” (Genesis 44:15, ESV)

But Nebuchadnezzar isn’t really interested in revealing how phony these guys are.

He desperately needs to understand these terrible nightmares.

The phonies unwittingly set the stage for the next step in Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion when they say, “*The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.*”

Their view is polytheistic but otherwise the exact truth that Daniel will demonstrate.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever fought over something unimportant?
2. Do you know any good ghost stories? Any that teach?
3. When in history has a world view been defeated?
4. What are the phoniest things in our society?
5. Have you ever had an important dream?

Items for prayer: