

# DANIEL'S HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

## DANIEL 1:1-7

### SCRIPTURE READING AND INSIGHTS

Begin by reading Daniel 1:1-7 in your favorite Bible. Read with the anticipation that the Holy Spirit has something important to teach you today (see Psalm 119:105).

In today's lesson, we will focus our attention on the historical circumstances of Daniel and his friends. With your Bible still accessible, consider the following insights on the biblical text, verse by verse.

#### ***Daniel 1:1-2***

*Third year (1:1):* This would have been 605 BC.

*Jehoiakim (1:1):* See Major Themes.

*Judah (1:1):* Judah was one of the 12 sons of Jacob. (His mother was Leah.) The tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed the southern kingdom, also known as Judah (see Genesis 29:35; 37:26; 44:14; 49:8-10; Numbers 1:27; Judges 1:8; 2 Samuel 2:4; 1 Kings 12:20, 23).

*Nebuchadnezzar (1:1):* See Major Themes.

*Babylon (1:1):* Babylon was situated on the banks of the Euphrates River, a little more than 50 miles south of modern Baghdad. Because of its ideal location, Babylon was an important commercial and trade center in the ancient world. The nation was also brimming with paganism.

*Jerusalem (1:1)*: This city rests in the Judean hills at about 2,640 feet above sea level. King David of Israel captured the city in the tenth century BC and built his palace there. His son Solomon eventually became king and built a magnificent temple, making Jerusalem the center of Israel's religious life. Jerusalem would later become famous worldwide because it was the scene of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

*The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand (1:2)*: The Lord used the Babylonians as His whipping rod to chastise the people of Judah for their unrepentant sins (see Jeremiah 25:9; 27:6).

*Vessels of the house of God (1:2)*: The house of God was the Jewish temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem. The temple was rectangular, running east and west, and was about 87 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 43 feet high. The walls of the temple were made of cedar, and carved into the wood were cherubim (angels), flowers, and palm trees. The walls were overlaid with gold. The floor was made of cypress.

Solomon's temple had a Holy Place and a Most Holy Place. The Holy Place (the main outer room) housed the golden incense altar, the table of showbread, and five pairs of lampstands, as well as utensils used for sacrifice. Double doors led into the Most Holy Place, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. The ark rested between two wooden cherubim, each standing ten feet tall. God manifested Himself in the Most Holy Place in a cloud of glory (1 Kings 8:10-11). This temple—the heart and center of Jewish worship for the kingdom of Judah—was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

The "vessels" were sacred objects in the temple. The Babylonians seized these sacred objects as spoils, believing this represented the victory of Babylon's gods over the God of Israel. Little did the Babylonians know that it was actually the one true God of Judah who handed His own people over to the Babylonians for chastisement (see Deuteronomy 28:64; Jeremiah 25:8-14).

In any event, the sacred objects of the temple would have included "the golden altar, the golden table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstands of pure gold... the lamps, and the tongs, of gold; the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and fire pans, of pure gold; and the sockets of gold, for the doors of the innermost part of the house" (1 Kings 7:48-51).

*Shinar (1:2)*: Another term for Babylon.

*House of his god...treasury of his god (1:2)*: Like other pagan nations of the Ancient Near East, the Babylonians believed in many false gods and goddesses. These gods were thought to control the entire world of nature, so being successful in life required placating the gods. The Babylonians also believed that their military victories indicated that their gods were more powerful than any other nation's gods. However, in the Babylonian religious system, the gods' behavior was considered unpredictable at best.

Each city in Babylon had a patron god with an accompanying temple. Several small shrines were also scattered about each city, and people often met there to worship various other deities. The chief of the Babylonian gods was Anu, considered the king of heaven, and the patron god of Babylon was Marduk. "His god" (1:2) is likely a reference to Marduk.

### ***Daniel 1:3-5***

*Chiefeunuch (1:3)*: This term does not necessarily refer to a man who was castrated. The Hebrew term *saris* can simply refer to a government official (see 2 Kings 8:6).

*Bring some of the people of Israel (1:3)*: In one section of the Mosaic Law, recorded in Leviticus 26:33, 39, God threatened His people with exile if they chose to be unfaithful to the terms of the covenant established at Mount Sinai (see also Deuteronomy 4:27; 28:64). As it happened, the people of Judah disobeyed the Lord for an extended time. The resulting exile did not occur all at once. Initially, only "some of the people of Israel" were brought to Babylon, including Daniel and his friends. This would have been in 605 BC. The exile came to full fruition in 597 BC when Babylon destroyed both Jerusalem and its temple, and at that time countless Jews were exiled to Babylon.

*Youths (1:4)*: Young teenagers—probably between 14 and 17 years old.

*Teach them (1:4)*: The Babylonian literature they were required to study probably included writings on agriculture, architecture, astrology, astronomy, law, mathematics, and the difficult Akkadian language. (One recalls that Moses was likewise trained in Egyptian literature—Acts 7:22.) Nebuchadnezzar wanted these young men to be enculturated and assimilated into Babylonian society (see Major Themes). As we will see throughout the rest of the

book, however, Babylon influenced Daniel and his friends very little. Instead, they greatly influenced Babylon by remaining faithful to the one true God.

*Food...wine (1:5):* That the king allowed the youths the food and wine he partook of was likely designed to foster dependence, gratitude, and loyalty to the king.

*Educated (1:5):* The youths were educated for three years, not quite as long as it would take a person to get a college degree today.

### **Daniel 1:6-7**

*Daniel (1:6):* In the ancient world, a name was not a mere label, as it is today. A name was equivalent to whomever or whatever bore it. A person's name could indicate his or her character, personality, or allegiance. Knowing a person's name therefore amounted to knowing a great deal about him or her.

We see this illustrated in the names of major Bible characters. The name Abraham, for instance, means "father of a multitude," which was fitting because Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation. The name David means "beloved," and of course, David was a king specially loved by God. The name Solomon comes from a word meaning "peace"—and Solomon's reign was characterized by peace. In each case, we learn something about the individual from his name.

The same is true regarding the names given to the four Hebrew youths mentioned in Daniel 1:6: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Daniel's name, for example, means "God has judged," or perhaps "God is my Judge." Note that the ending of Daniel's name, *el*, is a Hebrew term for God. Daniel's parents were apparently God-fearing people.

*Hananiah (1:6):* This name means "Yahweh has been gracious." Note that the *iah* ending (or *yah*) is an abbreviation for God's name, Yahweh.

*Mishael (1:6):* This name means "Who is what God is?" Again we see the *el* ending, a Hebrew name for God.

*Azariah (1:6):* Azariah's name means "Yahweh has helped." Again, the *iah* ending (or *yah*) is an abbreviation for God's name, Yahweh.

*Tribe of Judah (1:6):* The Israelites were divided into 12 tribes, each descended from one of the 12 sons of Jacob: Reuben, Gad, Manasseh, Asher, Naphtali, Zebulon, Issachar, Ephraim, Benjamin, Judah, Simeon, and Dan. The tribe

of Judah is particularly significant, for Genesis 49:10 prophesied that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah and reign as King. Judah is therefore a royal tribe.

*Beltshazzar (1:7)*: Daniel and his friends all had Hebrew names that honored the one true God of Israel. The Babylonians believed their gods were superior to the God of Israel. The young men's names were therefore changed to honor Babylonian deities instead of the God of Israel. Daniel was renamed Beltshazzar, meaning "Bel, protect his life," or "Bel, protect the king's life." (Bel was a Babylonian deity.)

*Shadrach (1:7)*: Hananiah's name was changed to Shadrach, apparently meaning "Command of Aku." (Aku was another Babylonian deity.)

*Meshach (1:7)*: Mishael's name was changed to Meshach, meaning "Who is Aku?"

*Abednego (1:7)*: Azariah's name was changed to Abednego, meaning "Servant of Nebo." (Nebo, also known as Nabu, was yet another Babylonian deity.)

## MAJOR THEMES

1. *King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon*. Nebuchadnezzar's name means "Nabu has protected my inheritance." Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful of the Babylonian kings. He is famous for taking multitudes of Jews into captivity from 605 to 597 BC, among whom were Daniel and his companions (Jeremiah 27:19; 40:1; Daniel 1:1-7). After Daniel's companions were thrown into the fiery furnace and miraculously delivered (Daniel 3), the king became afflicted with a strange mental disease as a punishment for his pride and vanity. He was eventually restored.
2. *King Jehoiakim of Judah*. Jehoiakim was the second son of Josiah and became the eighteenth king of Judah (2 Kings 23:33-34; 2 Chronicles 36:6-7). He was born about 633 BC. He was a vicious, cruel, selfish, rebellious, and irreligious man who encouraged idolatry (see Jeremiah 19). He flaunted his impiety when he destroyed a prophetic scroll written by the prophet Jeremiah. He died a violent death (2 Kings 24:3-4; Jeremiah 22:18-19; 36:30).
3. *The enculturation of exiles*. Daniel and his Jewish friends were enculturated in Babylon. They were trained in Babylonian language and literature and

instructed to eat Babylonian food (though Daniel was able to make other arrangements). They were given Babylonian names that honored Babylonian gods. The idea was to make them suitable for service in the king's palace.

### DIGGING DEEPER WITH CROSS-REFERENCES

*Exile as the consequence of disobedience*—Genesis 15:13-14; Exodus 1:11-14; Deuteronomy 28:36; Judges 2:14; 2 Kings 17:6-7; Isaiah 39:6; Amos 5:27

*Sacred objects of the temple*—Exodus 25:29; 37:16; 40:9; 1 Kings 7:51; 2 Kings 14:14; 24:13; 25:14; 2 Chronicles 36:18; Ezra 1:7; 5:14; Jeremiah 28:3

### LIFE LESSONS

1. *A failure to repent brings God's discipline.* A failure to repent of sin always brings God's discipline in the life of a believer. Recall that this is what happened to David following his sin with Bathsheba (Psalms 32:3-5; 51). This can happen to us today too (Hebrews 12:5-11). Never forget, "If we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way" (1 Corinthians 11:31 NLT).
2. *God is sovereign over human affairs.* Daniel 1:2 reveals that God sovereignly allowed Judah's captivity. Scripture reveals that God is absolutely sovereign—He rules the universe, controls all things, and is Lord over all. He may utilize various means to accomplish His ends, but He is always in control. You might want to meditate for a few minutes on Psalms 50:1; 66:7; Proverbs 16:9; 19:21; 21:30; Isaiah 14:24; 40:15, 17; 46:10.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does the reality of God's sovereignty mean to you personally? Does this doctrine comfort you, frighten you, or maybe a little of both?
2. If you were forced to live in a part of the world brimming with paganism, do you think you'd still be able to effectively serve God with a good attitude?
3. Has God ever moved you outside of your comfort zone? If so, how did you adapt?