

DANIEL 1:1-21

DANIEL'S TRAINING IN BABYLON

Daniel and Revelation Series

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, who heard the prayer of Daniel the moment he turned to you, hear us today as we read his story, ponder his choices, learn from his creative and faithful behaviour, and try to discern what it means for us today to live as your holy people. Amen

EXEGESIS

The book of Daniel is set between 603 and 537 BCE. It follows the story of four men deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, and the long and distinguished career of one of these- Daniel. It covers the Old Testament period known as 'the exile', a disturbing but crucial period in Israel's history. Two questions are often asked about the book. First, is it history or fiction? It is presented as history, but Scripture contains both genres and God speaks through both, so either is feasible. Second, when was it written? The 6th or the 2nd Century BCE? Many scholars believe that it is – at least in part- 'apocalyptic literature' (because it contains visions and revelations), and therefore would have been written between 200BC and 100AD. It is however possible that the canonical version is an updating of an older story which was used to encourage Jews struggling in a later period of oppression.

The major themes of the book are: 1) The sovereignty of God in history, despite evidence to the contrary. Empires and rulers come and go, but the purposes of God cannot be thwarted. 2) Exile appears to be a disaster, but God is refining Israel, changing their perspectives, laying foundations for the future. 3) The call to God's people to be faithful in exile: faithfulness means being engaged, not retreating to the ghetto, and living distinctively but graciously and attractively.

There are several areas in which the book can be a resource for us: 1) Living and working in an increasingly alien post-Christendom environment. 2) Interpreting the present, seemingly discouraging, exile experience of the church in western culture. 3) Speaking prophetically and engaging politically in a world built on different values and assumptions. 4) Remaining faithful, like Daniel, from young adulthood to old age. 5) Developing a robust spirituality that sustains us in the face of difficulties.

In this chapter, Daniel and his friends are given new names and taught Babylonian language and literature. They are being groomed for diplomatic service as court magicians. They accept this training but refuse to eat the food provided. They ask for a simpler diet of vegetables and water, and suggest a ten-day experiment to convince the palace master this will not harm them. Their stance is firm but respectful. God honours their loyalty to the covenant, and they thrive on the diet, becoming proficient magicians.

REFLECTION

Where do we draw the line between dissent and conformity in post-Christendom societies? In a culture that is moving away from the Christian values it has historically, albeit imperfectly, espoused, how do we make this judgement? Are we conscious of the cultural indoctrination – we might even call it catechesis or discipling – we receive on a daily basis through television, newspapers and other media?

In which areas of life will we embrace, or at least not challenge, the norms, assumptions and priorities of this emerging culture? And on which issues will we refuse to compromise? What does it mean to be ‘in the world but not of the world’ in this diverse and rapidly evolving context?

Daniel and his friends no doubt discussed what they should do. We are not meant to answer these questions alone – individualism and lack of accountability are features of the culture we need help interpreting. Can our churches and other Christian groups understand themselves as communities of discernment and resistance, helping us to reflect prayerfully and biblically on these issues, helping us to work out when to adapt and when to dig our heels in?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What might be contemporary equivalents of the cultural issues the Israelite exiles faced in Daniel 1?
2. How important are attitudes, tone of voice and relational warmth when we dissent?

CLOSING PRAYER

Sovereign Lord, whose presence can be known in Babylon as well as in Jerusalem, and who invites us to seek the welfare of wherever we live and work, guide us by your Spirit and in the company of your people into ways of courageous and gracious faithfulness.

Amen

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Ernest Lucas: Daniel (IVP, 2002)
- Peter McDowell: At Home in Exile (Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, 2012)
- Stuart Murray: A Vast Minority (Paternoster, 2015)