

Daniel 1:1-7, No. 2**“When a Christian’s World Crumbles”****November 6, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

The story of Daniel begins as the long story of Judah’s spiritual decline and rebellion against God draws to its close. The third year of Jehoiakim was not the end of Judah. The event being described in the first verses of chapter one was a preliminary incursion by the Babylonian army. It was imposing its will upon helpless states and, as in this case, deporting promising locals to the homeland. The end for Judah would not come for some twenty years when, in 586 B.C. Judah’s foolish rebellion against Babylon resulted in the destruction of the nation, the ruin of Jerusalem, and the razing of the temple. The book doesn’t explain why the Lord gave Judah into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand. The author knew every one of his readers would know the answer to that question. Our chapter 1 is clearly an introduction or prelude to the book. That is indicated by the fact that it identifies both the beginning and the end of Daniel’s career (from the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim to the first year of the reign of Cyrus the Persian emperor). In our dating system that means that Daniel was shipped to Babylon with other exiles in 605 B.C. and served there until 539 B.C., some 65 years. We do not know when Daniel died. The first chapter plunges us immediately into the action and introduces the main characters of the following narrative. [Longman, 42]

Text Comment

- v.1 A question that I must often ask myself in considering a biblical text is whether a particular problem of interpretation needs to be raised. If there is an adequate answer to an alleged difficulty, is it even necessary to mention the difficulty. In this case, I think, it is necessary, because it is one of the standard objections to the historical reliability of Daniel and so one of the arguments for a second century B.C. date for the book. The difficulty is that here we read that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in the *third* year of Jehoiakim. There are two problems. The first is that Jeremiah says in 25:1 that the first year of Nebuchadnezzar was the fourth year of Jehoiakim, not the third (cf. 46:2). The second is that there is no record of such a Babylonian invasion of Judea or siege of Jerusalem in 605 B.C. The *Babylonian Chronicle*, our main source of information for events in the Babylonian empire in this period, does not mention any siege of Jerusalem in all of its account of Babylonian military campaigns in the Levant in 606 and 605 B.C. So many scholars have concluded that this is a confused and inaccurate account of the history made by an author who lived centuries after the event.

There are perfectly reasonable replies to this objection. We do know that Nebuchadnezzar was the crown prince and field commander of the Babylonian army in their war against Egypt in Syria and Palestine at that time. It is possible he is named king proleptically (that is, in anticipation) here, as he would very soon succeed his father. We do that ourselves. For example, if we were to read in a book or an article a sentence that began, “In the childhood of President Obama...” we wouldn’t think to voice the objection that he wasn’t president when he was a child because we know who we are talking about and why we would have mentioned his title along with his name. [E.J. Young, *Daniel*,

35] But it is also possible that the confusion results from there being two different systems of dating regnal years at that time, both of which systems, by the way, are found in the Old Testament. I won't go into detail but no one doubts that if Daniel is using the Hebrew system and Jeremiah was using the Babylonian system, Jehoiakim's *fourth* year in Jer. 25:1 would be Jehoiakim's *third* year in Dan. 1:1. What is more, the *Babylonian Chronicle* does state that at that time the Babylonian army conquered *that entire part of the world*. Small nations easily overcome, as Judah was in 605 B.C. would not require special mention. Nor does this way of speaking require Nebuchadnezzar to have been there at the scene. It was enough to say that that entire part of the world fell under Babylonian rule. The materials of ancient history, different as the chroniclers' interests and his methods of reporting were from ours today, often present problems of this type, and are very often resolved in just these ways. There is certainly no justification for saying that Daniel is certainly in error in its dating in v. 1.

In any case it is worth noting at the outset that according to Daniel Nebuchadnezzar was simply an instrument in God's hand and Judah's conquest the outworking of God's plan. The divine name used here is *Adonai*, not Yahweh, which means "Lord" or "Master." Nebuchadnezzar may have been unaware of the fact, though he would learn it soon enough, but he was in fact a lackey in another Lord's government!

- v.2 There seems to have been no great battle. Jehoiakim probably realized that discretion was the better part of valor and opened the gates to an army he couldn't possibly resist or defeat. [Young, 36] The articles taken from the temple, apparently the smaller, more portable vessels and implements are mentioned here in part because some of these same "articles" and especially some golden goblets taken from the Jerusalem temple, will figure in Belshazzar's bacchanal, his final party as the shades gathered around Babylon, as it turned out the very night the city of Babylon fell to the Persians. We remember that night as the night the handwriting appeared on the wall. The spoiling of a nation's temple in those days was thought to be evidence of victory not only over the nation but over its god. Then to place those vessels in the temple of your own god, in this case back in Babylon, was the living demonstration of the superiority of your gods to those of the conquered people. Marduk had apparently soundly whipped Yahweh. The losers lost because their god(s) couldn't protect them. The reality was otherwise – as the Philistines learned to their regret when they put the Ark of the Covenant in the temple of their god Dagon – but it would take longer this time to demonstrate that fact. [cf. Longman, 47] Notice that Daniel refers to the temple as "the house of God," that is, the true and living God, a fact that the rest of the book will demonstrate in a variety of ways!
- v.4 The Babylonians chose the best of the young male exiles for service in the government: the fellows with the best background, who were the best physical specimens, the most impressive to look at, and the brightest. They could take their pick and they did. The purpose of this training of exiled youth in Babylonian language and customs was apparently part of the overall strategy of imperial control. Remember, at this time, Nebuchadnezzar wanted to control Judah without actually having to occupy it. Occupation was expensive and troublesome. In this way upper class Jews would become enamored of Babylonian ways and serve Babylonian interests either in their homeland or

in Babylon. The empire needed a bureaucracy that was able to manage far flung regions, communicate in many languages, and exercise control in ways most likely to serve the interests of the empire but also in ways likely to mollify conquered peoples. That required help that only the citizens of conquered peoples could provide. They may also have been thought of as a kind of hostage, a practice the Romans would later use, taking the children of the leaders of conquered peoples to Rome, raising them there, and effectively keeping them as hostages to prevent rebellion in their home countries. Their fathers couldn't attack Rome without reprisals being carried out against their own sons! Here Daniel and his friends are described as from either the royal family or the nobility of Judah. The rabbis taught that Daniel and the others were descendants of King Hezekiah. [Longman, 47] In any case, what they received was what, I suppose, we would now call a "makeover." [Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, 30]

Babylonian officials and the empire's educated classes spoke Aramaic which was becoming the lingua franca of the Near East. But Babylon's historic language was Akkadian, a Semitic language like Hebrew, but with a complicated written script described as syllabic cuneiform (cuneiform is the alphabet composed of wedge like characters). It was probably Akkadian that Daniel would have been required to learn.

Among the arts and customs in which the young men would have been trained was Babylonian forms of divination: predicting the future by reading the moon and the stars, the interpretation of dreams (which will become a feature of the following history), the reading of the livers of sheep and so on. They were to be immersed in the Babylonian way of thought and it was expected that they would come to find it preferable to their Jewish heritage. After all, Babylon was glorious and Jerusalem was a ruin.

- v.7 The change of names was more significant than might at first appear. A name is just a name for us in the western world today. We choose names largely by how we like the sound of them. We'd resent being forced to change it by some political power, but changing our name wouldn't be of religious significance. But that was not the case here. The names of all four of these young men had a form of God's name as a part. The "-el" ending of Daniel and Mishael, is the word "God." The "-ah" ending of Azariah and Hananiah is the short form of Yahweh. So "God is my judge," "the Lord is gracious," "Who is what God is?" and "The Lord is a helper" were changed into names no Hebrew boy from a devout family would ever have been given. The new names included or were derived from some form of the names of Babylonian gods or goddesses: Bel, Marduk, and Nebo. [cf. Duguid, *REC*, 9] They were, in other words, idolatrous names! And someone who wore them carried the idolatry about with him and uttered it every time he introduced himself by name. The meanings of these Babylonian names are not all certain, but it seems clear that all four of them reflected Babylonian theology! The point, very obviously, was to eradicate the last vestiges of their loyalty to their former way of thinking, their former religion, their former way of life, and to become thoroughly Babylonian.

What is interesting and perhaps important is that the men did not appear to have considered the changing of their names a hill to die on. They will fight a battle over their

diet, but did not, so it seems, make an issue of the change of their names. More on this next time.

To appreciate what happened to Daniel and his three comrades, we need to apply our imagination to their circumstances. They were suddenly ripped from their homes in Jerusalem, or some other Jewish town, separated from their loved ones – perhaps never to see them again – and in the company of other dispirited Jews made to trudge what must have seemed the endless miles to Babylon to face a future as bleak as any pious Jewish young man could imagine. And we know that these young men were pious, devout, faithful Jews. That must have made their separation from their homeland - the Promised Land – and from their faithful parents and siblings even more painful. See them walking away from their parents and siblings, waving their last tearful goodbyes, pretty sure that they would never see them again!

And then what exactly happened to them? To be sure, they were introduced to Babylonian society in a far easier way than many of the exiles, who were put to work as laborers or artisans. They were given special treatment. But what was that treatment? It has long been wondered, for example, if an unspoken implication of this material in vv. 3-6 is that at the time these young men were selected for new positions at the Babylonian court, they were castrated and became eunuchs. It is, obviously, not explicitly stated that such was the case, but we do know that many who worked in the Babylonian court were eunuchs. Ashpenaz' title has been understood to mean "chief of the eunuchs," (cf. the ESV's translation in v. 9) and, in any case, the fact that the chief eunuch was the one in charge of these men might be taken to mean that they were to be eunuchs as he was. What is more, Isaiah had prophesied (39:7) about some of the descendants of Hezekiah:

"...some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."

That, by the way, is the text that the rabbis thought indicated that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were descendants of Hezekiah. To be sure, it is thought by some that the term translated "eunuch" should simply be translated "official" and it is possible that the fact that these men were "without blemish" would mean that they had not been in any way disfigured. My own opinion is that it is more likely that these four young men were made eunuchs. Does that change your understanding of their situation? Four young men who would naturally have looked forward to love and marriage found themselves not only in a foreign land but now incapable of marriage or having children, a fate much worse in that world than it is even today. Suddenly, stretching before them was a lonely future in a foreign land, living at the beck and call of people who had no sympathy for their deepest convictions.

It doesn't have to be your fault that you find yourself in a terrible mess. Jeremiah lived his life as a bachelor, not because he wanted to live alone, not because he didn't want to marry, but because that loneliness was his calling, a visual warning to the people of Judah that the days of marrying and giving in marriage were coming to an end. Jeremiah lived a difficult life and died in Egypt far from home – the one place no Jew ever wanted to die – among a group of wicked people he despised because his was the fate of a prophet of the Lord born in the wrong place at the wrong time! The coming generation of Christian believers in the United States may find that they too

will have a much harder time than their parents and grandparents did. It may be that their testimony, as Daniel's, will be "the lines for me have *not* fallen in pleasant places!" [Psalm 16:6]

So far as we know, Daniel and his friends were faithful young men, believers, servants of the Lord. Their response to Ashpenaz, which we will read next week, is proof of that. In being sent to Babylon they were not themselves being punished. They were, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, caught up in the punishment being visited upon the people as a whole. They represented the remnant of faithful Jews in an unfaithful Judaism. But they suffered along with the rest. It has often been the case with the faithful people of God. We do not live to ourselves! We are part of a community and, like it or not, in many ways we share the fate of that community.

But what is emphatically the lesson of this narrative is that hardly anyone really grasped or understood what was happening in this history. What one commentator cheekily referred to as the "media take" on these events at the time would have been that the powerful Babylonian army had finally defeated the Egyptians. In one of the most consequential battles of ancient history, in the summer of 605 B.C. at Carchemish on the Upper Euphrates River, the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho of Egypt and so put an end to what remained of the Assyrian Empire and dealt a death blow to thousands of years of Egyptian power in the Near East. Egypt would never be a major power again, as the prophets in fact had predicted would be the case. To any observer, this would have had little or nothing to do with Judah, a minor kingdom on the fringes of the Egyptian empire. True enough, Judah would become a vassal of Babylon instead of Egypt, but small as she was, she was going to be someone's vassal. By all human appearances it was another geo-political transformation such as had happened a number of times before in the ancient world and would happen many times thereafter. The Egyptians had been followed by the Assyrians, though Egypt had retained significant power, but now all of that was changed. Although no one knew it at the time, the Babylonians would be followed – quite quickly as it happened – by the Persians, who would in turn fall to the Greeks, who would give way to the Romans. What mattered, or so it seemed to everyone, was always who happened to be commanding the heights and now it was the Babylonians.

Only Daniel and a few other faithful believers really understood that all of this rising and falling of empires was part of a much larger story. And only those today, with a Bible in their hand, can really understand what is happening in our world. What was happening then and what is happening now is that the Lord was and is working out his purposes for the world. To be sure, we know very little of those purposes. Why Egypt and why Babylon? Why Carchemish? Why at this particular moment in world history? We cannot say. What we do know is that it was *the Lord who gave* Jehoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's time.

You won't find that sort of statement in the writing of virtually any historian today, even the evangelical Christian ones. But the active sovereignty of God is the unassailable *fact* of biblical revelation. And no fact has more profound implications for our life in the world. Human history, including that part in which we play a part, is always, inevitably, in every respect a story with a divine plot. True enough, we may understand only the smallest part of God's plan and purpose, but that we understand it all is not the important thing. What matters is that we know that what is unfolding is God's plan and purpose. The Babylonians thought *they* were changing history. Ultimately, however, they were simply an instrument in God's hand to do his will in the life of

mankind, and, supremely, the life of his people. And once Babylon had been employed for this purpose, sinful as those kings and that people were, it was itself tossed aside on the garbage dump of failed states.

No doubt God had many things to accomplish in Babylon and in Egypt, but chief among his purposes at Carchemish and in the rise of Nebuchadnezzar was the punishment of his people for their betrayal of his covenant with them. He had promised them, as far back as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, that should they break his covenant and refuse to repent of their unfaithfulness he would drive them out of the Promised Land. He had already done that to the northern tribes in 721 B.C. He used the Assyrians to accomplish his judgment in that instance. Now he was doing it to the southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin. The Babylonians were the tool he was using now. He had told Hezekiah during the Assyrian period that his failure to trust Yahweh and instead to rely on Babylon to help him would result in the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of some of his descendants and what we see in this history is very simply God being true to his word. Divine faithfulness doesn't mean that God will always give his people what they want. Most fundamentally, it means that God will always be true to his Word. There is, what might be called, a positive faithfulness and a negative faithfulness, a faithfulness in salvation and a faithfulness in judgment, but all of it is faithfulness on God's part to what he has told us in his Word. And because he is the sovereign ruler of this world and everyone in this world, he can use whatever instruments he pleases to exercise that faithfulness in human affairs. What Daniel 1:1-2 does, as do many like texts in the Bible, is draw back the curtain so that we can see what is really going on in the world.

Elisabeth Elliot, as you may know, was made a widow twice over. On the 8th of January 1956 her missionary husband Jim Elliot was killed with four other faithful men by the Ecuadorean Indians they were attempting to reach with the gospel. And then her second husband, the theologian Addison Leitch, died of cancer in 1973. She wrote in the aftermath of her second husband's death how helpful the Apostles' Creed had been to her. What things, she asked herself, had not changed even though her husband had died and she was once again alone? We can well imagine Daniel and his friends asking similar questions. And the answer, of course, is that God has not changed, his nature has not changed, his sovereignty has not changed, his holy purposes have not changed, his promises to those who trust in him have not changed, and his great redemptive plan and purpose for the world has not changed. This point is emphasized in chapter 1 by the repeated use of the phrase "the Lord gave." We find it first in v. 2, but we will find it again in v. 9 and once more in v. 17. The Lord was still there, still at work, still blessing and keeping his young sons in the midst of the trials they were facing in a faraway land. God was present in Babylon as surely as he had been present in Jerusalem. He was as much the ruler and the savior there as he had been in the Promised Land. [Davis, 27] In spite of appearances God was still in absolute control!

Now, to be sure, that divine sovereignty was not visible to the world. Nebuchadnezzar would have laughed in your face had you told him that his victory was due entirely to Yahweh, the God of the Jews, and plans that Yahweh had both to judge his people and to redeem the world. But what makes Daniel so riveting as a book and so important to Christians is that it demonstrates in the most memorable and powerful ways that Nebuchadnezzar *was* in fact entirely subject to the rule of Yahweh. In fact, in the chapters that follow Nebuchadnezzar himself will be brought to

confess that very fact! Daniel is all about drawing back the veil. The veil will, in all likelihood, never be drawn back for us as it was for Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, but the fact that it was for them is all the proof that you and I need that the lessons they were taught will always be the truth for us.

No words can adequately describe what a difference that understanding makes in human life: that in and through everything that happens, God is at work, and that because that is so all things must work together for good for those who love God. There is a hand at the helm of the ship of life and it is the hand of the God of perfect wisdom, perfect faithfulness, and perfect love. In spite of all appearances, God is in control. Sometimes that conviction is all that keeps us sane! [Davis, 30]

Christians worked this conviction into their dating of history. When did something happen? *In the year of the Lord* such and such. Everything that happened happened *in the year of the Lord*. The move away from A.D. in our time, from dating the years *anno domini* to dating them C.E., Common Era or B.C.E., Before the Common Era, signaled an intentional and highly significant change in the worldview of the western world. Our world now thinks in the way Nebuchadnezzar thought! In the early church, suffering persecution as often as it did, Christians would date the death of the martyrs by the appropriate year, but then would add *regnante Jesu Christo*, “in the reign of Jesus Christ.” So and so died for his faith, was taken from his family, was tortured to death in such and such a year *in the reign of Jesus Christ*! [Michael Green in Davis, 30] That is what it means to say that “the Lord gave Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand.” Of course, only faith can speak this way. Daniel is a book of faith *and sight*, but *the sight* that was given to Daniel and his friends is meant to strengthen *the faith* of those, like you and me, who do not and will not *see* the hand of God as they were given to see it long ago Babylon.

There is another important aspect of this divine sovereignty revealed in the statement that the Lord gave Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand. I owe this wonderful insight to Ralph Davis, a retired PCA minister and professor of Old Testament who has written a superb commentary on Daniel. What we see here is that God’s sovereignty is *a humble sovereignty*. Yahweh had allowed *his* name to be trampled under Babylonian feet. He could have shriveled Nebuchadnezzar and his army on the spot had he wished. He had done just that to an Assyrian army when it had besieged Jerusalem years before. Indeed, in due time Yahweh will turn Nebuchadnezzar into a cow until he is ready to acknowledge that there is but one God in heaven and that living and true God is Yahweh, the God of Daniel. But he did not. He allowed the treasures of his house to be despoiled, indeed to be carted off and placed in the temple of some worthless, lifeless idol, as if that idol, Marduk, had defeated *him*. That is what everyone in Babylon thought and, alas, far too many in Jerusalem. “...there is no doubt about how the media would view this.” [Davis, 29]

The Lord obviously knew how all of this was going to look to almost everyone when the Babylonians carted off the utensils of his temple to store them in the treasure house of Marduk. “Pagans would be singing, ‘Praise Marduk from whom all blessings flow.’” [Davis, 29] What we see here is what we will see in the life, ministry, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ. A God willing to suffer shame, to have his reputation trampled under feet, if only he might save his people; in this case if only it might awaken his people to their danger and prompt them to put

their trust once again in him. The Son of God did the same thing, taking upon himself the form of a slave, a defeated and humiliated failure, because only in this way could he deliver his people from themselves and from their sin.

This should be as great a comfort to us in our sorrows and struggles as it must have been to Daniel and his friends, thoughtful, intelligent, faithful, biblically sophisticated young men that they were. They knew that God was behind everything that happened, had indeed brought it to pass. The prophets had said that this is what he would do and, sure enough, it is what he did. *But only they knew it.* The rest of the world did not. It thought of Yahweh as nothing, a local little god incapable of standing up to the likes of Marduk. They did not understand that he was the only God, the Maker of heaven and earth. Nebuchadnezzar would come to understand that the hard way. But meantime Daniel knew what almost no one else did because God himself was hiding himself, humbling himself precisely to place his people in a situation in which they would learn what it was like for God to turn his back on them.

This is one of the most remarkable things about our Christian faith, yours and mine. We believe in an absolutely sovereign God, omnipotent and omniscient, who controls everything down to the smallest detail but who hides himself behind the screen of seemingly manmade events in the world. It is in the Bible's record of those moments – those comparatively few moments in the history of the world – when God has come out from behind that screen and revealed himself: in the three periods of miracles, in the history of Daniel, and supremely in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ – that we learn *what is always the case*. The history of this world unfolds according to the divine will, everything that happens is what *he* has determined should happen and in the way he has determined it will happen. That is the great importance of the historical narrative of the Bible, such as we have here in Daniel 1: it reveals what is always true but can almost never be seen. And who is this sovereign God? One who is willing to suffer humiliation himself for the sake of his people! An all-powerful God who is willing to set his power aside.

Why did Elisabeth Elliot turn to the Apostles' Creed upon the death of her second husband? Because it reminded her of what is true though it cannot be seen: The Triune God is present in the world and accomplishing his will and central to his purpose is the eternal salvation of his people. Everything takes a back seat to that, even the Almighty's own reputation!