

A Royal Hostage in Babylon

608 BC was a bad year for the Jews. Josiah, who had ruled for eighteen years as a faithful servant of God, died fighting Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo. His son Joahaz ruled for only three months, then Neco deposed him. Neco installed Joahaz' brother Eliakim as king, and changed his name to Jehoiakim. Then, just to keep Jehoiakim in line, Joahaz and some of his family were taken to Egypt as royal hostages. His life there would be comfortable as long as Jehoiakim behaved, but if he rebelled, Joahaz would be killed. This arrangement allowed Neco to keep Judah in line without leaving a military force in Judea. As long as they paid him tribute money, he didn't bother them (2 Chron 35:22-36:12, 2 Kgs 23:35).

Then Nebuchadnezzar showed up.¹ In 605 he defeated the Egyptian army at Carchemish, making it "non-existent."² He marched south through Lebanon toward Egypt intending to conquer it completely. Judea just happened to be in his way.

Nebuchadnezzar didn't have any particular beef with the Jews, so when he arrived, he made them an offer they couldn't refuse. They'd pay tribute to Babylon instead of Egypt, and everything would be OK. Refuse, and he'd destroy Jerusalem. One look at Nebuchadnezzar's army sealed the deal. The Jews switched sides. What did they have to lose?

Before we go any further, we need to review God's covenant with Israel. Once they entered the Promised Land (Deut 28:1-14), if they followed God, He would defeat all their enemies (v. 7). The whole world would see how powerful Yahweh was, and would be afraid (v. 10). The Hebrews would be so blessed that everybody would come to them to borrow (v. 12). Of course, anyone who wished to follow God could, and God would bless them, too (Exod 12:48).

But the Hebrews constantly rebelled. This led to trouble from the Philistines, Amelkites, Moabites, Edomites, and any other unfriendly neighbors. The northern ten tribes were so evil that God finally disowned them (Hos 1:9). Assyria conquered them in the eighth century BC. Eventually Senaccherib relocated the northern tribes and brought in outsiders.³

Finally, God's patience with the Jews ran out. Jeremiah told the Jews they'd better straighten up and fly right. If they didn't, they were in real trouble.

The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah... "these twenty-three years the word of the LORD has come to me, and I have spoken to you again and again, but you have not listened... "Turn now everyone from his evil way and from the evil of your deeds, and dwell on the land which the LORD has given to you and your forefathers forever and ever; and do not go after other gods to serve them and to worship them, and

¹ We generally speak of him as "Nebuchadnezzar" with an "n." But that wasn't his original name. 31 times the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah use his given name "Nebuchadrezzar," with an "r." The form with the "n" is his throne name, taken after he became king of Babylon in September 506BC. For simplicity, we'll use the "n" form.

² This is the language Nebuchadnezzar used in his official report.

³ The few remaining Hebrews married the imported pagans. Their offspring became the Samaritans. Torah forbids intermarriage with unbelievers, giving the Jews an excuse to hate the Samaritans

do not provoke Me to anger with the work of your hands, and I will do you no harm.' "Yet you have not listened to Me," declares the LORD, ... "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,' declares the LORD, 'and *I will send* to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land, and against its inhabitants, and against all these nations round about; and I will utterly destroy them, and make them a horror, and a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. (Jer 25:1-9 partial).

God's covenant blessings are for covenant-keepers. But the Jews weren't interested in God's ways. They "devised iniquity and gave evil advice" (Ezek 11:2). They felt that since they were in Abraham's bloodline, the land blessings in Genesis 15 belonged to them (Ezek 11:12). So God prepared to remove *all* of their birthright blessings (cf. Exod 4:22). But He gave them a full warning and time to come around.

God's "servant Nebuchadnezzar" didn't do a whole lot to the Jews in 605. They had just agreed to his deal when a messenger arrived from Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's father Nabopolassar had died. This was an emergency.

If Nebuchadnezzar stayed with the army, there was a real possibility that somebody would take over the throne. Nebuchadnezzar's life expectancy would suddenly be very short. So he took a few men and made a thousand mile forced march across the desert to Babylon in twenty days and "sat down on the throne" on September 7, 605BC.⁴

Before he left, Nebuchadnezzar left orders for some of the Jews to be brought back to Babylon as hostages, just as Neco had done. The hostages were to be the best and brightest, preferably from the royal family (1:3-4). Once they got to Babylon, they were to attend Babylon U in preparation for service in the royal court. They were treated well, and ate **from the king's choice food** (1:5).

Four of the captives were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. As soon as they arrived in Babylon, they were given Babylonian names to show they were now under the power of the gods of Babylon (1:6-7). This didn't sit well with Daniel and his friends, but what could they do about it? As captives, any open resistance would get them killed. Later, Daniel "adjusted" the names to avoid giving any credit to pagan gods.⁵

⁴ D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of the Chaldean Kings* (London: British Museum) 1961, 47.

⁵ Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald) 2000, 18-19.

Hebrew Names and meanings		Babylonian Names and meanings		Daniel's "adjustment"
Daniel	God is my judge.	Belteshazzar	Bel-shazzar: "may Bel (the principal Babylonian god) guard his life"	"t" added to "Bel"
Hananiah	Yahweh has been gracious.	Shadrach	Shada-Aku: "Order of Aku" (Sumerian moon god)	Aku reduced to the letter "k"
Mishael	Who is what God is?	Meshach	Mushallim-Aku "who is like Aku"	Aku reduced to the letter "k"
Azariah	Yahweh has helped.	Abed-nego	Ardi-Nebo: "Servant of Nabu"	Babylonian "ardi" becomes Hebrew "abed" and "g" replaces "b"

It didn't take long for Daniel's group to find an opportunity to show the power of Yahweh. But first, they had to step out in faith.

The king's food was the best available, prepared by the best chefs. And the Hebrews weren't vegetarians, either.⁶ But they weren't about to give any credit to the Babylonian gods, and the king's food was ceremonially offered to idols. If they ate it, they were treating the false gods as real and worthy of worship. This was intolerable (cf. 1 Cor 10:25-29). It would defile them before God. So they made a stand.

Daniel went to the commander of the officials in the royal court and asked permission to *not* eat the food that had been offered to idols. But he didn't ask the favor that way. He diplomatically asked for a vegetarian diet for himself and his friends (1:12).⁷ The commander thought he'd lose his head (literally) if the Hebrews looked sick, but he bought into a ten-day trial (1:10-14).

At the end of the ten days, Daniel's group looked noticeably healthier than the kids who'd been pigging out on all the rich food (1:15). As a result, they had vegetables the rest of the time. And when they graduated from Babylon U, God showed His blessings.

Their final (1:17-20) was an oral exam by the king. Daniel's group didn't just pass. They were **ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers in his realm**. They didn't just beat the other kids in class. They were better than the professors! That's what I call being blessed. God made sure nobody could miss how good His servants were.

The story in Daniel 1 is over. But there are a couple key items we need to look at because they will be important later on. First, Daniel reports he and his friends were "ten times better." That's not possible.

If you can walk, talk, and chew gum, nobody's ten times better than you are. Yes, there are geniuses, but if your IQ is average, their's isn't likely to be more than twice as high as yours. In this case, "ten" just means "a lot." It's a figure of speech. And that's important. We're going to see the number ten again. And when we see it, we'll need to know that it's not intended to be an exact number. It's a round number, and means something similar to

⁶ Leviticus 11 specifies which meats a Hebrew could eat.

⁷ The Hebrew of this exchange quotes the exact wording of Genesis 1:29, showing that Daniel was setting up the test to honor the Creator.

our word “several.” In other words, it can be as few as six or seven, or as many as a dozen or fifteen.

Next, Daniel records that he served **into the first year of Cyrus** (1:21). That was 539-8BC.⁸ A lot of history happened in those 67 years. The first event we’ll see is revolt in 594BC. Nebuchadnezzar’s personal records tell of hand-to-hand combat in the palace halls, with the king personally dispatching a number of rebels. Next, the Jews rebelled in 586BC by trying to get Pharaoh Neco to kick the Babylonians out of Judea. Nebuchadnezzar resolved that by destroying Jerusalem and the temple. He took “all Jerusalem captive” to Babylon (2 Kgs 24:14). He also took all the sacred vessels of the temple to Babylon (2 Chron 36:18). This language deserves our attention.

When Nebuchadnezzar first conquered Jerusalem, he took some of the articles of the house of the Lord to Babylon (2 Chron 36:7). This act symbolically declared that the Babylonian gods Nabu, Sin, and Bel were more powerful than the God of the Hebrews, Yahweh. A few months later, Nebuchadnezzar had to come back to Jerusalem, and he took the new king and more of the temple articles to Babylon, reinforcing the message (2 Chron 36:10). Finally, in 586, he finished the job. This time, taking “all the articles of the house of God” (2 Chron 36:18) to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar declared the total victory of his gods over Yahweh.

After Nebuchadnezzar died, there were another five kings over Babylon.⁹ Daniel served through all the intrigue and palace revolts. This is extremely unusual, since the new king after a palace coup would purge any officials he had any suspicions about. God certainly blessed Daniel.

After Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he was still a court official, even though he was in his eighties. But his career ended shortly. He **went to his rest** (12:13) to wait for God’s final victory.

⁸ Babylon fell on October 13, 539BC.

⁹ Those who ruled after Nebuchadnezzar were Amel-Marduk (known in the Bible as Evil-Merodach), Neriglissar, Laborosoarchod, Nabonidas, and Belshazzar. As we noted in the introduction, Belshazzar wasn’t really the king, but we count him here because he was the acting king. Along the way, there were numerous palace intrigues and a couple of murders. To survive in the palace through all that is nothing short of a miracle, since anyone whose loyalty was in question would be immediately executed.