

# **1. SETTING THE SCENE**

**DANIEL 1:1 – 2:4**

**<sup>1</sup>In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.**

**<sup>2</sup>The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods.**

**<sup>3</sup>Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, <sup>4</sup>young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. <sup>5</sup>The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court.**

As noted in the Introduction (page 88), the author responsible for compiling the Book of Daniel begins in Hebrew, a statement of his pride in his traditional and sacred language. In this introduction he sets the scene for the court tales and the visions, associated with the legendary Daniel.

Jehoiakim was placed on the throne of Judah by the Egyptians. That was in 608. The third year of his reign coincided with the year of Nebuchadnezzar's defeat of the combined armies of Egypt and Assyria in the battle of Carchemish (605). It was also the year of the death of his father, Nabopolassar, the founder of the Neo-Babylonian kingdom whom he succeeded as king. The siege of Jerusalem was in 598, the tenth year of the reign of Jehoiakim (see 2Kings 24:10-12). The person responsible for composing this Introduction is not interested in recording the history of the sixth century BC. This is rather the setting for the stories about the legendary Daniel, who is being presented as a model for the persecuted community. The author assumes that what happened to Jehoiakim and the sacred vessels happened because 'the Lord' [אֱלֹהֵי יְיָ, 'ādōnāy] allowed it.

Shinar (verse 2) is the ancient name of the area of Babylonia (see Genesis 10:10; Isaiah 11:11; Zechariah 5:11). In a number of ways this first story sets the scene for the stories in chapters 2-6. The 'vessels of the house of God' (verse 2) appear again in 5:2-3, 23.

The name Ashpenaz (verse 3) appears to be Akkadian, which fits nicely with the setting. The Hebrew word translated 'nobility' is a loan word from Persian. Chaldeans (verse 4) is the name of the Akkadian-speaking tribe to which Nebuchadnezzar belonged. It was they who ruled the Neo-Babylonian Empire (see Daniel 5:30). In Hellenistic times 'Chaldeans' came to mean 'astrologers' or fortune-tellers (see Daniel 2:2-5, 10; 4:54; 5:7, 11). Here it carries the second meaning. Daniel's 'wisdom' transcends theirs. It is different also from the 'wisdom' extolled in Sirach 39:1-5. His insight into mysteries is the fruit of divine revelation.

Daily 'rations' (verse 5) is yet another Hebrew word derived from Persian.

The servant in charge of the palace gave Babylonian [Akkadian] names to the four young nobles. Daniel [דָּאֲנִיֵּאל, dānîy'ēl; 'my judge is 'El'] received the name Belteshazzar (calling on the Babylonian god, Bel, to guard his life). Hananiah [חַנַּנְיָאֵה, hananyâ; 'YHWH is gracious'] received the name Shadrach (possibly a deliberate mis-spelling of the name of the god, Marduk). Mishael [מִישַׁאֵל, mîšā'ēl; 'Who is what God is?') was called Meshach ('Who is what the god Aku is?'), and Azariah [אַזַּרְיָהוּ, 'azaryāh; YHWH has helped'] was called Abednego ('servant of the god Nabu'). This listing of the Hebrew and Babylonian names prepares the reader for 2:17 where only the Hebrew names are used, and 2:49 and 3 where only the Babylonian names occur.

Daniel is determined to avoid ritual defilement (verse 8; compare Greek Esther 14:17; Tobit 1:10-11; Judith 12:1-4; 1Maccabees 1:61-62) and to maintain his Jewish identity. This was an issue during the persecution of Antiochus. Note the divine action in verse 9. God is the cause of what is happening.

The Hebrew word translated here as 'guard' (verse 11) is another loanword from Akkadian.

'Ten days' (verse 12) is a common motif in the literature of the time for a time of spiritual trial (see also in the Newer Testament, Revelation 2:10). We are being prepared for the trial undergone by Daniel's companions in chapter 3, and by Daniel in chapter 6.

The Book of Judith (8:6-7) also suggests that fasting improves health and beauty (verse 15).

<sup>6</sup>Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. <sup>7</sup>The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

<sup>8</sup>But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. <sup>9</sup>Now God allowed Daniel to receive favour and compassion from the palace master. <sup>10</sup>The palace master said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king."

<sup>11</sup>Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: <sup>12</sup>"Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>13</sup>You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe."

<sup>14</sup>So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days.

<sup>15</sup>At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. <sup>16</sup>So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

Wiser than the Babylonian wise men

**<sup>17</sup>To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.**

**<sup>18</sup>At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, <sup>19</sup>and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court.**

**<sup>20</sup>In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.**

**<sup>21</sup>And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.**

**<sup>21</sup>In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him.**

**<sup>2</sup>So the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. When they came in and stood before the king, <sup>3</sup>he said to them, "I have had such a dream that my spirit is troubled by the desire to understand it." <sup>4</sup>The Chaldeans said to the king (in Aramaic):**

The authors underline the fact that the amazing wisdom of the young Jewish men was a gift from God (verse 17). In the series of chapters, 2, 4 and 5 Daniel is portrayed as an interpreter of dreams and visions.

The word 'magicians' (verse 20) occurs only here and as a description of the magicians in the court of Pharaoh (Genesis 41:8, 24; Exodus 7:11, 22). 'Enchanters' is derived from Akkadian, and so fits the Babylonian scene.

The first year of Cyrus was 538 – which has Daniel in the court of the king in Babylon for 68 years (dated from 606, verse 1).

Having set the scene in chapter one, the author introduces, still using Hebrew, the first of the folk tales. The tales themselves, from chapter two verse 4 through to chapter six are presented in Aramaic, the language in which they were composed, and the spoken language of second century Judah.

Disturbed by his dream, Nebuchadnezzar summons those officially entrusted with interpreting dreams. Magician and enchanters have already been mentioned (see 1:10), as have Chaldeans (see 1:4), used here in the applied sense of fortune-tellers.

Verse four lets the reader know that the story from here on is being presented in its original language.