

Ambassador
to a Pagan Court

Daniel

Four Ambassadors

While Ezekiel was berating his countrymen in their impoverished villages, Yahweh was doing something quite different with four Jews taken to Babylon back in 605 BC. It seemed that a rapidly expanding empire prompted Nebuchadnezzar to recruit administrative staff from among the conquered nations. It wasn't easy to find people with the intellect and basic education to master the classical literature of Babylon (written in an ancient and complex language), the official language in which state business was done (Aramaic), and the intricacies of Babylonian magic, divination, and dream interpretation. A royal administrator had to know all of these, and in addition, had to be physically perfect and handsome in order to fittingly represent his master.

So in each captured country, Nebuchadnezzar's officers selected a few young noblemen who showed potential for such studies. In Judah they found four. These teenagers agreed to have their names changed as a sign of submission to Nebuchadnezzar, even to receive names derived from the names of Babylonian gods. They agreed to study the literature of sorcery and nature worship even though Yahweh had forbidden such practices.

They were apparently secure enough in their commitment to and understanding of Yahweh that they could immerse themselves in their neighbors' thought-world without having their own convictions undermined. (These four, at least, had benefited from the labors of Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah.) Their firm foundation enabled them to serve as Yahweh's ambassadors to a pagan court, ambassadors who understood the people they were reaching well enough to speak their language and touch them where they lived.

The Limits of Conformity

The four captives were willing to do all this in order to identify with the culture to which Yahweh had sent them, but thereafter they repeatedly drew lines they would not cross. Over and over they had to discern between the conformity that won them an audience in the culture, and the conformity that would have meant selling out and losing their message.

The first line they drew was refusing to eat the king's food. Young administrators-in-training were housed separate from the palace, but they were fed from the royal kitchens to signify that they were the king's men. But the king's meat and wine were routinely offered to pagan gods before being served, and in the Near East, regularly eating someone's food was powerfully symbolic of swearing allegiance to him. The four young Jews just could not in good conscience eat food that linked them to Babylon's gods so firmly.

So their leader, Daniel, maneuvered their steward into feeding them vegetarian diets and no wine. Yahweh confirmed this stratagem by giving them better health than their colleagues who ate the king's food. He also demonstrated the old proverb "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom" by enabling His ambassadors to excel in all aspects of their training in wisdom by the end of their two-year course.

This limit to conformity was private, but later the four Jews had to risk their lives to maintain their principles. At one point, Nebuchadnezzar experimented with uniting his multi-racial empire under one state religion, and commanded officials from all of his provinces to bow down before a statue he erected.

Daniel (who by then was one of the king's chief officials) managed to evade the directive, but his three friends were seen by envious colleagues (who reported them to the king) and thrown into a furnace for refusing to worship the state idol. These three told Nebuchadnezzar flatly that their God was able to rescue them from the flames, but even if He chose not to, He deserved their loyalty. When miraculously the flames did not consume the men, Nebuchadnezzar was so awed that he praised this powerful God and on the spot declared Judaism legal in his empire.

Decades later, Daniel found himself in a similar position. Jealous fellow courtiers, out to get Daniel, convinced a new king to decree that for a month no one could worship anyone but him, knowing that Daniel would ignore such an order. That time, God demonstrated His power to protect His own by preventing a den full of lions from devouring Daniel.

Messages from the God of Heaven

Most of the time, however, Daniel and his friends were able to go about their duties in a corrupt, pagan government, serving Yahweh and His justice in quiet ways. But in a few key instances, Yahweh employed Daniel as His spokesman to these people who knew nothing about Him.

Daniel's book reflects his (and Yahweh's) sensitivity to speak in ways his hearers could grasp. When addressing nonJews, Daniel avoided Yahweh's personal name and instead used titles that would say something to his hearers: God, the God of Heaven, the God of My Fathers, the Great God, God Most High. The whole middle section of his book is written in Aramaic, rather than Hebrew, to demonstrate God speaking to all nations in the international language. And when God wanted to get messages across to the kings Daniel served, He used dreams and omens because Babylonians were prepared to hear from the gods in this way.

God really wanted to give Nebuchadnezzar a chance. The king was insecure about having risen so fast to become lord over a huge empire, so God gave him a dream showing the kingdoms of men as a huge statue of a man. Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom was the head of gold (the first and greatest). But after him would

follow a silver, a bronze, and an iron kingdom of ever-decreasing glory. The feet of the statue were iron mixed with clay: strength and fragility mixed. And finally would come an eternal kingdom founded by God, not humankind, that would smash and replace all human kingdoms. The message: Your human empire is secure for a time, O Nebuchadnezzar, but the God of Heaven is lord over all nations and the whole scope of history. For a time He will allow human kingdoms to rise and fall, but at the end of time He will sweep them all away and establish a kingdom that will last.

God enabled Daniel to interpret this dream for Nebuchadnezzar at the very beginning of his career; the young Jew could hardly have been more than twenty, but he proclaimed the truth about God's supremacy to a man who held Daniel's life in his hands. Daniel was quick to credit God, rather than his own skill, for the interpretation, since it was only God's answer to desperate prayer that gave Daniel the insight to explain the dream and save his own life.

Sadly, the king responded only by recognizing Daniel's God as one more powerful deity in a pantheon of gods. So some forty years later, God sent him another dream, which Daniel again had to interpret: unless Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that he was subordinate to the God of Heaven, and showed it by ceasing to oppress his own subjects, God would reduce him to insanity until he yielded. This is just what happened. But although Nebuchadnezzar did eventually admit that God was the real one in charge of the world, he seems to have died before he truly understood what that fact implied.

The Changing of Kingdoms

Just as Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed, the Babylonian Empire was a flash in the pan that God raised up briefly to discipline His people. He had promised Babylon's fall to Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; He had told Jeremiah it would happen seventy years after the Captivity began; He had even told Isaiah the name of the man who would do the job.

Sure enough, in 549 BC, a Persian king named Cyrus defeated his overlord and became king of the vast Median Empire north

and east of Babylon. Two years later he absorbed Asia Minor, west of Babylon, and cast his eye on Babylon itself. Nebuchadnezzar had been dead for fifteen years, and the current king of Babylon was Nabonidus. Now Nabonidus had allied with Cyrus years earlier and was not concerned to build up defenses against him. Instead, Nabonidus dabbled in ancient literature. The priests of Babylon resented his attempts to replace their gods with another, so he fled to Arabia, leaving his son Belshazzar in charge.

Belshazzar ruled the Babylonian Empire the whole time Cyrus was jaunting around building his own empire. By 540 BC Belshazzar could see he'd made a fatal mistake in letting his army go to seed, but it was too late. In the autumn of 539, with the Medo-Persian army on his doorstep, Belshazzar was losing his grip. To drown his terror he threw a wild banquet, even calling for the sacred vessels of Jerusalem for his drinking cups. Toward the end of this drunken feast, the horrified ruler saw writing appearing on the wall opposite him: words about weights of money. His mother told him to summon an old magician named Daniel to interpret the message. Daniel explained that God had weighed Belshazzar's worth and found him wanting; that very night Babylon fell to Cyrus.

Wider Visions

With experiences like these, there was no doubt in Daniel's mind who was in charge of the volatile world he lived in. But what about the other Jews scattered around the Near East? Some were settling in to make good livings in commerce and manufacturing; others were barely making it.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel were dead, and Yahweh sent no emissary to replace them. But one prophetically minded Jew sorted through the annals written by the prophetic communities since Solomon's time and wrote a sweeping history to answer the question in everyone's mind: *Why did Yahweh let this happen?* In this book, which we call 1 and 2 Kings, the author traced how Israel's and Judah's kings failed to lead their people to keep the covenant, and showed that the Exile was the natural result of rejecting their Lord.

Some priests began to understand that keeping the covenant

was essential, and they started codifying the books of Moses and the prophets into a system of religious practice that could hold its own against pressures to assimilate into local culture. If Yahweh kept His promise to restore them, they were determined never to break the covenant again.

But all of these activities were focused on the Jewish community, which was carefully insulating itself from the alien world around it. Daniel could not afford such a narrow perspective, and God's focus had always been wider. Also, now that Judah would never again be an independent state, but would be continually subject to the pagan kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, God had to prepare His people to survive under regimes that would make it difficult for them to live His way. In the furnace and the lions' den, Daniel and his friends had received foretastes of what would happen when the interests of a secular state clashed with loyalty to the true God; the four forerunners escaped miraculously, but it would not always be so. Living in the corrupt world without being absorbed by it would demand the toughest kind of faith.

So Yahweh gave Daniel four visions to encourage the generations that would follow him. They echoed the glimpses Isaiah and Ezekiel had had of the far-distant future, but they also represented to a new kind of prophecy, which we call apocalyptic (from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, "revelation" or "unveiling"). In weird, symbolic pictures, Yahweh sketched highlights of what He had in store.

The Son of Man

The visions built on Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue. Daniel received the first two while Belshazzar was still reigning. In the first he saw four wild animals that represented the four kingdoms. The ruler of the fourth kingdom spoke boastfully of his power, but God appeared as the judge of men and kingdoms, and the fourth animal was slain. Then appeared "one like a son of man," who received from the judge authority to rule and even be worshiped by all nations in an everlasting kingdom.

Who was this "son of man" with whom Yahweh would share His worship? Yahweh had used the term for Ezekiel to emphasize

the prophet's mere humanness. But this Son of Man was the ultimate human, the true Son of Adam promised at the beginning, the One who alone of all His brothers bore the image of God untainted. He was not just the son of David, a king for a tiny nation, but King of all.

Wonderfully encouraging, but there was an ominous note. The fourth kingdom would be crushed, but not until after its king had blasphemed God and oppressed His servants cruelly. Those who remained faithful even to death, however, would reign with the Son of Man.

Babylon, Persia, Greece

The second vision, which Daniel received in 551 BC just as Cyrus was beginning to put Persia on the map, zeroed in on the second and third of the four kingdoms. The first was Babylon; its days were already numbered. Persia was number two, and Greece (which was just starting to be noticed as a power) was number three. An angel described to Daniel one of the kings of the Greek empire: a conniving despot who would war against God and His people. This vision so appalled Daniel that he spent days in bed, sick and exhausted.

Suffering and Perseverance

Daniel's third vision came just after Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC. Daniel had been reading Jeremiah and figured that the seventy years were about over, so he went to Yahweh with mourning and fasting, begging Him to forgive and free His people. As faithful as he had always been, Daniel saw in himself the same corruption that stained his people; he confessed passionately and threw himself on Yahweh's mercy. In response, an angel came to say Yahweh was granting his request. Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt, but beyond that, sixty-nine weeks of years remained until an anointed king would come. He would then be killed and there would be war, the destruction of the temple, treachery, and abominations before justice would be inflicted on a false ruler.

Two years later, Daniel was fasting to understand what he had seen, and a fourth vision came: an angel so terrifying that

Daniel was overwhelmed and had to be strengthened repeatedly just to stand up and talk. This warrior angel was battling the spirit princes who stood behind the earthly kingdoms arrayed against God's people. He gave Daniel more details of Persia and Greece (astonishingly accurate as to what would happen in the 200s and 100s BC) in which proud kings would rise and be dashed to dust, and one particular king would exalt himself to divine status, ravage Israel, and finally be crushed. In those terrible times the people of God would suffer horribly, but "the people who know their God will firmly resist" and "those who are wise will instruct many" (Daniel 11:32-33). Then the angel spoke of the end of the age, when after cataclysmic distress the dead would be raised to either eternal life or eternal shame.

Kings and Kingdoms

The details of all this were opaque to Daniel. From our hindsight we can see the rise and fall of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and a fourth kingdom: Rome. We know of a wicked Greek king, Antiochus IV, who did set himself up as divine and persecute the Jews in Israel, but we also find elements of Daniel's visions that look past that king. It appears that Antiochus was going to be a foretaste of many rulers who would tyrannize God's people for refusing to worship what is human, and of a final ruler who would be the epitome of this type. In the face of such oppressors, the message of the visions is clear: "The people who know their God will firmly resist."

Return to Jerusalem

Ezra 1-6, Haggai, Zechariah

First Return: 537 BC

"This is what Yahweh says to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armor. . . .
I will go before you
and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron. . . .
For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of honor,
though you do not acknowledge me.
I am [Yahweh], and there is no other;
apart from me there is no God." (Isaiah 45:1-5)

A century and a half after Isaiah recorded these words, King Cyrus of Persia rode victorious through the gates of Babylon,