

WRITINGS

Daniel 1:8

“Daniel Refuses the King’s Food”

“But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought *permission* from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.”

What is communicated by Daniel 1:8 is important about the discussion over the Torah’s dietary instructions, as the Prophet Daniel and his three friends, as Jewish exiles taken to Babylon, refused to eat from the royal food. Was this because of an adherence to kosher? Was this because they wanted to avoid the pollutions of idolatry? Was this because they wanted to resist assimilation into Babylonianism? There are various reasons proposed that need to be explored, informing Bible readers as to an overall theology of the dietary laws.

Conservative examiners of the Book of Daniel certainly approach the Prophet Daniel as having been a real historical figure, and the events it records as having taken place in the Sixth Century B.C.E. Liberal examiners, however, treat the Book of Daniel as a pseudepigraphal work from the Second Century B.C.E., produced in association with the Maccabean crisis, and widely designed to not just dismiss the Hellenizing regime of Antiochus Ephiphanes, but also to encourage Jews not to apostatize. As it would concern Daniel 1:8, the eating of pork, among other things, was forced upon the Jews (1 Maccabees 1:62-63; 2 Maccabees 6:18; 7:1), and the scene of the figure Daniel resisting the food of Nebuchadnezzar, was meant to bolster Second Century Jewish fidelity to the Torah.¹

Almost all of today’s Messianic people adhere to the Book of Daniel being a genuine product of a real Prophet Daniel, and its events having occurred in actual history, in the Babylonian and Persian Empires of the 500s B.C.E. Yet it is important for readers to be aware of various liberal perspectives regarding Daniel’s composition, which will be encountered in various study Bibles, as well as many commentaries, a few of which we will be considering in our analysis. For, even when one rightly accepts genuine Danielic involvement with the Book of Daniel, the thrust of Daniel 1:8 should have encouraged many Jews in the Maccabean period to resist assimilation.²

Daniel 1:8 Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were exiles taken from the Southern Kingdom of Judah to Babylon (cf. 1:1-2). Because of their wisdom and intelligence, they were pulled into the royal court so that they might be used in the service of the Babylonian Empire. Ashpenaz is the royal official who was directed by Nebuchadnezzar to see that these Jews were trained in the literature and language of the Babylonians, with them all receiving Babylonian names. Among the different things granted to these four, would be a daily stipend of food from the royal table:

¹ George A.F. Knight, “The Book of Daniel,” in *Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 43.

² For a further review of the composition of the Book of Daniel, consult “When Was Daniel Written?”, in the *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 1385, and the entry appearing in the workbook *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

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"Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every *branch of* wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and *he ordered him* to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and *appointed* that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Then the commander of the officials assigned *new* names to them; and to Daniel he assigned *the name* Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego" (1:3-7).

It is asserted how, "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king's food or the wine he drank, so he sought permission of the chief officer not to defile himself" (v. 8, NJPS). The main verb in view is *ga'al* (גָּאַל), which in the Hitpa'el stem means "to **defile oneself** (ritually)" (*HALOT*),³ or "**defile, pollute**" (*TWOT*),⁴ with most English translations having either "defile" or "defiled." The means by which Daniel would be defiled, would be *b'patbag* (בְּפַתְבָּג), "choice food" (NASU) or "rich food" (RSV), with the term *pat-bag* (פַּתְבָּג) involving the "portion (of food) for king, delicacies" (*BDB*)⁵ or "**(fine) food**" (*CHALOT*).⁶ Later in Daniel 11:26, the term also appears: "Those who eat his choice food [*pat-bago*, פַּתְבָּגוּ] will destroy him, and his army will overflow, but many will fall down slain."

Among examiners, there are three main proposals present for Daniel not wanting to eat from the Babylonian king's supply of food for he and his friends. These include:

1. an avoidance of idolatrous contamination
2. an avoidance of ceremonial uncleanness, in violation of the Torah's dietary instructions
3. the separation of Daniel and his friends out as Jews faithful to Israel's God

Daniel and his friends, as Jewish exiles faithful to God and to His ways, would have observed the Torah's dietary laws. The Ancient Israelites, preparing to enter into Canaan, were directed by the Lord, after all, to not "play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice" (Exodus 34:15). How much of the meat provided by the Babylonians to these Jewish exiles, would have been sacrificed to idols, and then made available to the royal court? Joyce G. Baldwin makes light of both pork and horse meat being eaten by the Babylonians,⁷ which would have been classified as unclean on the lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Furthermore,

³ *HALOT*, 1:170.

⁴ R. Laird Harris, "גָּאַל," in *TWOT*, 1:145.

⁵ *BDB*, 834.

⁶ *CHALOT*, 300.

⁷ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Daniel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978),

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the various animals classified as clean by the Torah, still were not too likely to be slaughtered appropriately with the intention of removing wide traces of their blood.

While adherence to the Torah's dietary instructions is a good reason for Daniel and his friends not partaking of the king's rations, it is also stated that they would not drink his wine (*yayin*, יַיִן). Drinking wine, or any other form of alcohol, is not prohibited by the Torah, but could have been polluted for various reasons (cf. Leviticus 19:25-28). With Proverbs 20:1 in view, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise," it has at least been interjected that the reason why Daniel and friends did not want to drink wine, was because the Babylonians did not dilute their wine with water, unlike the Jews.⁸

The common thought that Daniel and his friends did not want to eat from the king's table, solely on the basis of avoiding idolatrous contamination, can only be pushed so far. While being easily associated with not eating meat sacrificed to idols—the fact remains that various vegetables and grains in Babylon, which ended up in the royal court, could have been offered to idols as well. The Tanach emphasis is that all which was available to those Israelites and Jews in the exile, to be eaten, was to be regarded as "unclean" (cf. Ezekiel 4:13; Hosea 9:3-4).⁹

While reasons for Torah purity were surely present among Daniel and his friends, in not wanting to eat from the king's rations—to not eat from the royal table could also have been employed as a kind of passive defiance or resistance to the Babylonians. Allegiance to the Babylonians was being forced upon Daniel and his fellow Jews, and so not eating of the food that was being offered to them would involve not socializing or fraternizing with pagans, in one of the few areas available at their disposal. Iain Provan argues, "The connection between vv. 7 and 8 suggest that there is an element of political resistance...Daniel is determined not only not to break the law in the specific matter of religious purity but also not to compromise himself in general by accepting his redefinition as a Babylonian."¹⁰ Baldwin goes further, and argues that Daniel's rejection of the king's food implies not so much an issue of ritual uncleanness, as much of an issue of an obedience to God and being spared from the moral pollutions of Babylon:

"Those who had thus committed themselves to allegiance accepted an obligation of loyalty to the king. It would seem that Daniel rejected this symbol of dependence on the king because he wished to be free to fulfill his primary obligations to the God he served. The defilement he feared was not so much a ritual as a moral defilement, arising from the subtle flattery of fits and favours which entitled hidden implications of loyal support, however dubious the king's future policies might prove to be."¹¹

John Goldingay, however, thinks that Daniel's religious observance in the matter of eating, was no more or less scrupulous than that of King Jehoiachin,¹² who was taken into Babylonian captivity, and of whom it is recorded, "Jehoiachin changed his prison clothes and had his meals in the king's presence regularly all the days of his life" (2 Kings 25:29). He instead thinks that there was a significant spiritual reason for Daniel abstaining from

⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *BKCOT*, pp 1330-1331.

⁹ Cf. Baldwin, *Daniel*, 83; Iain M. Duguid and Paul D. Wegner, "Daniel," in *ESV Study Bible*, 1587.

¹⁰ Iain Provan, "Daniel," in *ECB*, 665.

¹¹ Baldwin, *Daniel*, 83.

¹² John Goldingay, *Word Biblical Commentary: Daniel*, Vol. 30 (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 18.

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meat and wine, stating, "Meat and wine is festival food, and abstaining from it is a sight of mourning or penitence and would be appropriate in exile...Further, meat and wine suggest food fit for nobility, whereas the four young men ask for peasant food."¹³ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher similarly suggests, "meat and wine are not only the foods of festivity (Isa 22:13), which may need to be avoided when the attitude of the exiles ought to be mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem, but they are also the foods of the wealthy rather than the peasants. The issue is dependence on royal largess and wealth—wealth that was not incidentally stolen from the livelihood of the nations conquered by the Babylonian Empire."¹⁴ Smith-Christopher then makes light of the scene of Belshazzar's feast witnessed later in Daniel ch. 5.

The thought that the Prophet Daniel, and his friends, avoided meat and wine from the king's table, as means of mourning or lamenting the exile, certainly possesses merit. Avoiding meat and wine as a means of mourning is seen later in Daniel, elsewhere in the Prophets, and in the Jewish ethical tradition of the Pseudepigrapha:

"In those days, I, Daniel, had been mourning for three entire weeks. I did not eat any tasty food, nor did meat or wine enter my mouth, nor did I use any ointment at all until the entire three weeks were completed" (Daniel 10:2-3).

"Therefore in that day the Lord GOD of hosts called *you* to weeping, to wailing, to shaving the head and to wearing sackcloth. Instead, there is gaiety and gladness, killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die'" (Isaiah 22:12-13).

"I repented before the Lord: I did not drink wine or liquor; meat did not enter my mouth, and I did not eat any pleasurable food. Rather, I was mourning over my sin, since it was so great. Never had anything like it been done in Israel" (*Testament of Reuben* 1:10).¹⁵

"Since I repented of these acts, I consumed neither wine nor meat until my old age, and I so no merriment at all" (*Testament of Judah* 15:4).¹⁶

The narrative records how Ashpenaz was concerned that by only giving Daniel and his friends vegetables and water, that they would be tired out and haggard, unlike the rest of the servants in the royal entourage. Daniel requested that they be given a ten-day trial period for his dietary request, and it is witnessed how Daniel and his friends were not only more healthy and fit than the others, but they were also imbued with Divine wisdom and insight:

"Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel," in *NIB*, 7:40.

¹⁵ H.C. Kee, trans., "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 782.

¹⁶ Ibid., 799.

forfeit my head to the king.’ But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ‘Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king’s choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.’ So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king’s choice food. So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables. As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every *branch of literature and wisdom*; Daniel even understood all *kinds of visions and dreams*” (Daniel 1:9-17).

While the statement of Daniel 1:16, “So the steward took away their rich food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables” (RSV), has been used at times to support vegetarianism—most important is that Daniel and his friends possessed faith and confidence in the God of Israel whom they served. If there were any health benefits of Daniel and company partaking of a vegetarian diet, they were secondary to the bigger issues of them being forced to have an association with the Babylonian court. It is witnessed in later Jewish history, as recorded by Josephus, how a group of priests in Rome only ate figs and nuts, perhaps for some of the same reasons why Daniel and his friends only ate vegetables and water:

“These I was desirous to procure deliverance for; and that especially because I was informed that they were not unmindful of piety toward God, even under their afflictions; but supported themselves with figs and nuts” (*Life of Josephus 14*).¹⁷

Daniel 1:8 application Daniel and his companions avoided eating the meat and wine provided by the Babylonians for a compilation of reasons. Gleason L. Archer offers the two basic reasons of their avoidance of unclean meat and pagan idolatry, remarking, “What he sought to avoid was being ‘defiled’...by contact with unclean meats—or even clean meats that had become contaminated with heathen worship. Rather than break faith with God, Daniel was willing to risk expulsion from the Royal Academy with the disgrace and danger that entailed. His priorities were firm.”¹⁸ It should, however, be quite obvious that there were other reasons in play for Daniel and his friends to avoid eating the Babylonians’ meat and wine, given their status as Southern Kingdom exiles.

Given the relatively powerless position of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in the Babylonian court—how would they have been able to passively resist and protest the Babylonian government, maintain fidelity to the God of Israel, and also maintain some kind of distinct identity as Jewish people? That such Jewish exiles in Babylon, needed to preserve their national identity and resist pagan assimilation, should be something obvious to readers. Strong integration into Babylonian society was being pressed upon Daniel and his companions, which would have involved eating the same kind of food as the Babylonian court. Using food and diet as a means of getting Israelites and Jews in the Diaspora to assimilate into paganism, is something that is witnessed in the broad Biblical

¹⁷ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged, 2.*

¹⁸ Gleason L. Archer, “Daniel,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 6:35-36.

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period. Lawrence M. Wills notes in the *Jewish Study Bible*, how “In the Diaspora there arose a stronger emphasis on dietary laws as a way of living a pious life without (or away from) the Temple, reflected here and in many works in the Apocrypha.”¹⁹ The Northern Kingdom exile Tobit, for example, would state, “Now when I was carried away captive to Nineveh, all my brethren and my relatives ate the food of the Gentiles; but I kept myself from eating it” (Tobit 1:10-11).

Even with various meats classified by the Torah as clean or unclean, likely involving factors of hygiene and avoidance of idolatry, the social dynamics of ancient Israelites and Jews not sharing meals with Assyrians, Babylonians, or Persians in the exiles, did have a noticeable factor of not being integrated into their society. Goldingay appropriately observes, “The distinctiveness of the smaller group is preserved by its avoiding the objects and activities in question. Expressed thus, holiness/cleanness/defilement are wholly theological or ritual categories. They are also applied to moral and religious activities: thus murder or worshipping other gods, as well as contact with a corpse or eating pork, defiles a person or a people and threatens their identity.”²⁰ In the case of Daniel and his companions, he further states how “Pagan food and drink may simply epitomize the pagan uncleanness associated with exile (cf. Isa 52:11). This reflects the fact that what we eat and drink, like what we wear and how we speak, generally constitutes an outward expression of our self-identity and commitments.”²¹ So for Daniel and his friends, to fully partake of what was being offered to them by the Babylonians to eat, not only contained an element of these Jews needing to preserve their national and spiritual identity—but also a definite element of these Jews not being complicit in the regime which has caused their exile!

Goldingay offers a useful summary on how while Daniel and his companions would have to integrate into Babylon to some degree, just to live, how important it would have been for them to only go so far. In this case, the varied components of what it meant to partake of the royal delicacies like meat and wine, was where they decided it was enough:

“By military defeat, geographical displacement, and cultural ‘flooding’ the Babylonians have sought to manipulate the Israelites, as humanly helpless (though not Godless or witless) victims of their will. Ashpenaz has just been deciding on names for Daniel and his friends; but now Daniel does some deciding for himself. We wonder what will happen to Israelite youth and Israelite wisdom when it is thrust into exile and taught Chaldean. We hoped that the qualities of those young men would mean that things would turn out all right; now Daniel gives us the first concrete indication that it will indeed be so, showing himself to be a worthy member of this elite...The young exiles cease to be faceless ciphers and helpless victims. Daniel seizes the initiative from the Babylonians, insisting on some determining of his own which counters that of Ashpenaz. At Babylonian food he draws the line. Questions about ambition lead to questions about purity.

“Accepting the palace provisions involves a compromise of faith in a way that accepting a share in its life, its work, its education, and its names do not...Total assimilation is to be avoided. Food, in particular, is determinative of identity; it is part of

¹⁹ Lawrence M. Wills, “Daniel,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, pp 1644-1645.

²⁰ Goldingay, *Daniel*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

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being 'embodied.' We are what we eat: the English call the French 'frogs,' the French call the English 'roast beefs.' It is common for an expatriate community to maintain its distinctiveness partly by maintaining its distinctive diet. Israel's own food laws presuppose that food is determinative of identity; part of their point is to preserve the distinctiveness of Israel over against other peoples. It is difficult to be sure precisely what was thought to be defiling about the Babylonians' food, and this may be because it was nothing more sharply conceptualized than that it was Babylonian."²²

Goldingay's observations, on the significance of Daniel and his friends not eating the Babylonian fare, are quite excellent. No Bible reader can deny how there is a definite component of the Torah's dietary instructions intending to keep God's people distinct and separated. Yet Goldingay, as a Christian Old Testament theologian, would widely argue that these instructions were intended only for the pre-resurrection era. Referencing Mark 7 and Acts 10 (discussed further), he asserts, "God is now abolishing the distinction between clean and unclean, which symbolizes and reinforces that between Israel and other peoples, because the gospel first preached to Jews is now to be preached to gentiles also."²³ So, while not eating the meat or drinking the wine from the Babylonians was acceptable for Daniel and his friends as Jews—perhaps the exact opposite would now be acceptable with the good news going out to the nations at large in a pagan world?

The setting of Daniel in Babylon, someone who is part of a defeated people in exile—with only a small modicum of hope before him of restoration to his homeland—is not the conditional scene as witnessed later in 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, where the Apostle Paul issues instructions to Corinthian Believers who are asked into the home of a pagan to share a meal. Paul directs, "If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, 'This is meat sacrificed to idols,' do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake" (1 Corinthians 10:27-28). Here, the issue is accepting the hospitality of someone else, presumably with the intention of being able to testify to the host of the good news of Yeshua. While no questions are to be asked about the meal served, if it comes out that meat sacrificed to idols is offered, the meal is to be refused. There are specific circumstances in view for 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, where some action is initiated in accepting an invitation (discussed further), unlike with the Prophet Daniel, who seemingly had little choice in what he could eat, as offered from the Babylonians.

²² Ibid., pp 24-25.

²³ Ibid., 25.