DIASPORA DANGERS, DIASPORA DREAMS

SHARON PACE

INTRODUCTION

Modern scholars of the book of Daniel have differed in their assessment of the author’s portrayal of life in the Diaspora. The oft-cited work by W. Lee Humphreys concludes that the author of the book of Daniel is confident in the benevolence of the kings and in the possibility of living a comfortable and successful life.¹ A recent study by Daniel Smith-Christopher details and critiques these studies, emphasizing that the author of Daniel, far from being at ease with the government, actually underscores the dangers of Diaspora living.² He concludes:

The Daniel tales teach that knowledge of Jewish identity as the people of [YHWH’s] light and wisdom is the key not only to survival, but also to the eventual defeat of the Imperial rule of “the nations” on earth.³

Building on Smith-Christopher’s article, my study also understands that the author of Daniel highlights the insidious evil of Nebuchadnezzar, the importance of community responsibility, and the religious and ethical obligations of observing the food laws and giving charity within a societal context that is threatening to Jewish life. I shall examine the duplicitous and menacing nature of Nebuchadnezzar as shown in Daniel 1, 3, and 4 as well as the response of solidarity by Jews who are threatened by him.⁴

³ Smith-Christopher, “Prayers and Dreams,” 290.
⁴ For further study on the portrayals of Belshazzar and Darius, see my forthcoming work, Daniel (Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys).
THE FIRST TEST

Daniel 1 introduces Daniel not as a sole hero, but as a member of a group of Judean exiles of noble origins that includes Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Both the challenges imposed upon Daniel as well as his responses to them are continually placed in the context of this group of youths. The opening scene introduces the reader to their first test of faithfulness while under Babylonian captivity. It begins with an interpretive historical description of Nebuchadnezzar’s capture of Jerusalem and its temple treasures, and the exile of its people, while describing the plight of four Jewish youths who are no longer nobles at the Jerusalem court; rather they are servants to the Babylonian king. As the king’s captive servants, Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, are forced to learn Babylonian curricula and are provided only the king’s food to eat. These two trials challenge the youths’ very essence as Jews. Their Babylonian education might affect the way they conceive the world, its meaningfulness, and the place of the God of Israel within it. The eating of non-kosher food would be a sure sign of their assimilation. As the course of these tests progresses throughout this chapter, the reader is reminded of the loss of the Judean kingdom, the might of Babylon, and the totalitarian regime of Nebuchadnezzar.

In contrast to these displays of Babylonian power, the author emphasizes the youth of these exiles and hints at their inexperience (1:4). Instead of choosing דובים (“youths”) which would unequivocally indicate that Daniel and his companions are adolescents or young men, the author here employs the word בנים (“children” or “boys”). Their lack of years is contrasted, however, with their highly prized skills and virtues: “they were versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king’s palace” (1:4). These virtues were understood as not only endowing one with secular intelligence, but with the insight to serve God and to keep the commandments, as wisdom helps one to discern God’s presence and to avoid those attractions, vices and disguised evils brought from a foreign culture.5

5 Mantic wisdom features prominently in the book of Daniel; nevertheless, aspects of wisdom associated with the knowledge of God and following the commandments also feature implicitly and explicitly in the book. See discussion in John Collins, Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel (Hermeneia series;