



Scenes from the Old Testament

Daniel in Babylon

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Daniel 1: 1–20 *1 Corinthians 1: 20 – 2: 5*

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606–69), *Belshazzar's Feast* (c. 1638),
National Gallery, London¹

Throughout its history the Book of Daniel has been a happy hunting ground for those who would construct a map of the future of the world, but it is less these visions about the finitude of world empires and more the narrative context, which is my particular concern this evening. The stories tell of educated young men suddenly being transported from life in their home city, Jerusalem, to the strange, opulent, world of the court of the king of Babylon, and finding themselves at odds with the surrounding culture. Throughout the Bible, from the stories of the Exile to Babylon through to the dramatic vision of Babylon seated on the many-headed beast in the Book of Revelation, Babylon has represented being confronted by another set of values, cultural and political dislocation, and the necessity of negotiating a way of existing in that situation. It is the kind of disorientation with which a subaltern people has to learn to come to terms, as they find a way of coping and surviving, assuming, that is, that they do not accommodate themselves completely to their oppressors' culture.

Life in 'Babylon' was not easy. It is evoked in the opening verses of Psalm 137, an experience with which many have resonated down the ages:

By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
(NRSV Psalm 137: 1–4)

The Jerusalem elite, exiled to Babylon appear to have found themselves on the fringes of the royal court, confronted with critical moments which threatened death, such as we find in the stories of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the Burning Fiery Furnace and Daniel in the Lions' Den, according to both of which they were punished for their non-conformity. The tales of the miraculous deliverance of Daniel and his Jewish colleagues (Daniel 3 and 6), the humiliation and abject words of submission to God on the part of King Nebuchadnezzar (4: 32) and the magnanimity of Darius the Mede, who replaced Belshazzar

¹ <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-belshazzars-feast>

king of Babylon (6: 26–7), cannot mask the fact that life for these Jewish exiles, despite the fact that they were received at the Babylonian court, was precarious in the extreme. They were constantly at the mercy of the capricious whim of an autocratic ruler (3: 13), however sympathetic he might seem to be (6: 14). But it was particularly the courtiers (3: 8–12; 6: 4), who appealed to ‘the law of the Medes and Persians’ for their own ends (6: 15) to persecute Daniel. These are famous stories but it is a little remarked passage (Daniel 1: 8–17) which has had special poignancy for me over the years, particularly as I have spent most of my adult life in the context of two of the world’s ancient universities and their peculiar traditions and customs:

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. Now God allowed Daniel to receive favour and compassion from the palace master. 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.” Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: “Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. 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.” So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. 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. So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. 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. (NRSV Daniel 1: 8–17)

Because of their Jewish upbringing, Daniel and his companions found themselves at odds with the lifestyle into which they had been so suddenly thrust, not least with regard to food, such an important part of life and social intercourse. Jews have always been faced with the challenge that Daniel and his companions encountered, at odds as they were with their new culture, the consequence of which is brought out in these verses. Food is a token for much else of life too – in terms of intellectual engagement and modes of relating. I do not pretend to be particularly ascetic – far from it – but nor do I cope well with the sumptuousness of college meals. Negotiating difference, or to put it in biblical terms, learning to live in Babylon, has been a corner stone of my existence.

Another biblical prophet, Jeremiah, had exhorted the exiles in Babylon not to go on hankering after Jerusalem, not to agonise about how to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land, but to engage with their context in Babylon (Jeremiah 29). Jeremiah had written to the exiles communicating to them the divine counsel, that they should settle, build houses, plant gardens and eat what they produced, marry and give in marriage, and seek the welfare of the city in which they were in exile, ‘for in its welfare you will find your welfare’. (*L. Bretherton, Christianity and Contemporary Politics: the Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, especially 189–99.*) What we read in the Book of Daniel is an example of such a response. There was no prescription given for resistance or survival. Sometimes it may have been a life of complete detachment, but more often than not it meant finding appropriate ways to live with integrity, whilst seeking the welfare of the city they inhabited; that was a crucial part of life in Babylon (Jeremiah 29: 7).

Despite their non-conformity, Daniel and his colleagues are depicted as men possessing an alien wisdom to that of the Babylonian seers and courtiers. According to the Book of Daniel, their advice was called on by successive kings. So, they were not merely parasites at the royal court but made a positive contribution to the understanding of politics, for those with ears to hear, that is, bearing as they did an uncomfortable message about the temporary nature of even the most sophisticated and apparently impregnable empire and the coming of a very different kind of polity. The apocalyptic wisdom of Daniel and his contemporaries was offered to those who would hear what would make for their peace, whether it was Nebuchadnezzar, albeit temporarily, learning humility (Daniel 4: 33), the ephemeral nature of empire (Daniel 2) or Belshazzar discovering the price of his arrogance and that he had been weighed in the divine balance and found wanting (Daniel 5: 27).

The experience of being a conquered people in exile enabled the Jews to understand the world and its future in ways which eluded the wisdom of Babylon. Indeed, it is a widespread assumption in modern biblical scholarship that as a result of life in Babylon, not only did the exiles discover how to carve out and to create in the midst of the constraints of their circumstances a safe space, to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, but also to reflect on how they had come to find themselves in this situation in the first place. The period of exile was *the* time when ancient traditions were collected, and their import for the situation of the Jewish people better understood. Also they began to yearn for a different, better world, when in the words of one of Daniel's messianic visions 'one like a human being came with the clouds of heaven [and] To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.' (Daniel 7: 13–14).

Learning to live in Babylon, has been a corner stone of experience for many, Jews and Christians, down the centuries. It is something which is central to the kind of non-conformity which runs like a thread through the Bible, from the lonely ethical vigil of the prophets to the socially disruptive narratives of the gospels and the Book of Revelation and the admonitions of the New Testament letters which are the foundation of Christianity. Life in Babylon is a theme which was taken up in the New Testament. The author of 1 Peter addresses the Christians as 'exiles' as he writes from Babylon, probably a way of referring to Rome (1 Peter 1: 1; 5: 13), and the visions of the Book of Revelation depict Babylon as an oppressive culture and contrasts it with Jerusalem, the future city of life. Indeed, at the climax of John's prophetic denunciation of Babylon there is the summons, 'Come out from Babylon, my people' (Revelation 18: 4). Unlike Jeremiah, there is no instruction in John's prophecy to seek the welfare of the Babylon of his day. Instead, in John's vision Babylon's fall is hailed with uninhibited jubilation: 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great'.

The political theorist Michael Walzer has written perceptively about the life of exile experienced by any who find themselves on the margins of a society or culture. He wrote about Pharaoh's Egypt, but what he has written applies equally to Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. Both Egypt and Babylon have been important themes in Western thought and have offered a resource to encourage and shape perceptions of the political world in which we live. As Walzer puts it,

... pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan (and we may add Babylon) are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The “door of hope is still open; things are not what they might be ... This is a central theme in Western thought, always present though elaborated in different ways. We still believe ... first, that, wherever you live it is probably Egypt (or Babylon); second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third that “the way to the land is through the wilderness”. There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching’.

(Exodus and Revolution, 1985, 149)

Those final words by Walzer remind us that the anonymous prophet of the exile, whose words are found in the book of Isaiah, told those enduring life in Babylon of their return from exile to Zion which would be like the events of the first Exodus. Thus, he announces God’s word to them: ‘Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old; I am about to do a new thing’ (Isaiah 43: 16; cf. 48: 20–1).

The stories of Daniel about life in Babylon and in Egypt have offered Jews and Christians down the centuries a way of understanding their situation, never quite feeling at home, never acclimatising and still living in hope. The stories continue to speak and beckon those who long for a better world to seek the welfare of the city in which they live, while being strangers and exiles there (Hebrews 11: 13–15).