



The Struggles

of Daniel with Religious Liberty

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Daniel, prophet of the sixth century BC, lived firmly by biblical principles, and yet he endured two different political systems, surviving six Babylonian kings and two Medo-Persian rulers. As a statesman Daniel was a successful minister in the Babylonian royal court as well as the president of the Royal Academy and a prominent prime minister in the Medo-Persian kingdom. Surprisingly, as a wise man, a Jew, a foreigner, and a captive, he was an outstanding counselor to many kings of different national and religious backgrounds. Life was not always easy for him, but he stayed in the court services of Babylon at least until the first year of Cyrus (Daniel 1:31), died at a ripe old age (probably in his nineties; ca. 622–530), and, for the most part, wisely stayed out of trouble in various situations involving the different strict royal commands.


The book of Daniel is full of paradoxes. In the midst of political tension, religious intolerance, and pressure, Daniel could choose his diet (chapter 1), pray openly (at least until the edict was issued against such a practice according to chapter 6), and write his visions (chapters 7–12). How-

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ever, one needs to search for such glimpses of freedom with a magnifying glass. The reader can only wish that the document would contain more material about religious liberty, but terms like “freedom” or “tolerance” are not even mentioned. Nothing is stated or suggested about the freedom of conscience. We may, of course, argue that these are modern cat-

egories. But in a few rare places there are hints of the concept of religious freedom, as some polytheistic societies exhibited a degree of respect for other religions. Persecution came in waves and thus was not practiced at all times. Much more is reported in the book about wars, the misuse of power, abuse, exploitation, intrigues, and the like. Chapters are teeming with violence and religious persecution. It seems that injustice is present everywhere. The issues of religious liberty and religious persecution are interrelated; therefore, I will deal with both aspects.

The book of Daniel begins with the attack of Babylon on Jerusalem. This is a theological key which marks the principal motif of the whole document—God’s people are persecuted, but God, as the ultimate Judge, executes righteousness and vindicates them.



Daniel 1—Hidden Persecution: An Attempt to Change Identity

King Nebuchadnezzar brought promising, young, and noble Jewish men to Babylon to give them the best his culture could offer. The intention was to prepare them to become good servants for the king in order to secure his government and empire.

The king knew how and what to do. To secure their loyal future service, he needed to change their identity. To achieve this goal, the text informs us that he changed three things: their diet (lifestyle); education (worldview); and names (religion by accepting new pagan names and worshipping foreign gods). His hidden agenda worked with the majority of the captives. However, Daniel and his three friends refused to identify with their new roles as is indicated by the corrupted forms of their names recorded in the book of Daniel which show that it was only an external change that did not affect their character. In addition, they refused to embrace the new lifestyle, but had no qualms about becoming the best students. They chose to attend the Babylonian University but stay committed to God's principles. The Babylonian tactic was to change these young people gradually, from the inside out, a subtle attempt to change their identity; nevertheless, their resistance in the name of their God was strong.

The verb "to give" is associated with God in the biblical creation stories. God gives food and provides for all needs, because He is the Creator and Provider (Genesis 1:29). But in Daniel 1, it is Nebuchadnezzar who provides, gives the food that is needed, and forces others to accept it (Daniel 1:5). When someone other than the Lord gives without giving credit to God and overwrites the religious convictions of others, such a person, system, or institution is trying to play God. Every time humans try to become God, they behave like beasts, and they degrade themselves to the level of animals.

God blessed and rewarded his followers by giving them wisdom to know how to navigate through antagonistic waters and what to learn. According

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to the book of Daniel, He caused the officials to show mercy in their demands to be faithful in matters of diet. Daniel and his friends knew the importance of boundaries in discerning how far they could go in assimilating Babylonian culture. Daniel 1 starts with the seeming defeat of the true God, but ends with the victory of God in Babylon because He cared for His dedicated ser-

vants. Their correct decision was the key to God's intervention on their behalf!

Daniel 3—Accidental Persecution: The Fiery Furnace

Nebuchadnezzar needed to secure his kingdom; the Babylonian Chronicle reports that there was a rebellion in Akkad (Dec 595–Jan 594) against the king where he personally put down his enemies and safeguarded his rulership: "He slew many of his army. His own hand captured his enemy." He then decided that everyone must swear a loyalty oath to him by bowing down and paying homage to his gods. He commanded that everyone had to worship them, an act of a totalitarian ruler.

What could Daniel's friends do? How far could they go and comply with this king's command? Was it all right to go to the plain of Dura? They decided to go to the designated place, but when the command came with the sound of music, they did not bow down in worship. Because they dared to disobey, the king's officials reported the rebellious act of these "foreigners" to the king. The Aramaic text colorfully describes the attitude of hostility toward them in terms of "cannibalism." Their malicious act is rendered as "they ate their pieces" (Daniel 3:8).

The king summoned Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and threatened them with a painful death. Nevertheless, they firmly stated that they could not worship an idol, because they served a living God who was able to rescue them from the fire. But even if their God would not save them, they boldly proclaimed: "We will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:18). They had the courage to say no, to go against the mainstream! Those persecuted in the book of Daniel always showed re-



spect to authorities (Daniel 2:37; 3:16–17; 6:21) but stood uncompromisingly for the truth.

In chapter 3 Nebuchadnezzar persecutes, but it was only an unplanned, accidental persecution due to his pride. It was a byproduct of his sinful ambition to rule as the greatest monarch. The desire to be the first, the highest at all costs, leads to absolutism and despotism.

Daniel 6—Deliberate Persecution: The Lion's Den

Chapter 6 presents a deliberate and premeditated attack on Daniel. Because Daniel was a man of integrity, faithful, and without fault in his conduct and state affairs, his envious colleagues devised a plot against him based on religious grounds. The text underlines that “the law of his God” (6:5) was the only accusation that they could use against him. This charge revealed the purposeful misuse of religion for personal gain. Persecution in the name of god(s), and manipulating with the sacred, is a most treacherous ploy. Unfortunately, power, pride, envy, and religion can be violent allies, and the manipulation of religion very often brings the most tragic results.

Daniel prayed regularly as was his habit and did not hide his faith as he witnessed about his Most High God. At times he enjoyed some religious respect, tolerance, and liberty, but then it was deliberately and maliciously taken away. The worst tragedies occur when one religious group enforces its views on another group.

Where there is no external control, objectivity, and accountability, there is a basis for abuse. The legislators in our story became manipulative. Fanaticism is blind and almost incurable. Instead of being impartial, they unselfishly planned their advantages. Unfortunately, envy and lust for power are very bad advisors. Power tastes sweet but its misuse has very bitter and often deadly results. However, the God of Daniel (6:26) is a living God (6:20, 26) and He intervened in Daniel's favor and rescued him from the lion's den and from the power of his enemies. Our God judges fairly

and justly! If God is for His people, who can stand against them? Even the “best” planned attacks cannot do any harm to those who put their full trust in God.

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Daniel 2, 7 to 12—Prophetic Perspective: Global/Universal Persecution

The stories and prophecies in Daniel are closely interconnected. What happened in the courts of Babylon and Medo-Peria locally has a global and universal application in the prophetic part of the book. Stories are types, and prophecies point to the antitypical fulfillment. What happened in the past is the microcosm, and prophecies explain the macrocosm dimension on a universal level.

Daniel 2 is a showcase of power and weakness at the same time. The king is insecure, and thus he tries to show that he can make decisions and is a possessor of life. He threatens to kill and issues a death decree. God intervenes and not only rescues Daniel and his three friends but also makes Daniel a hero. Chapter 2 presents, under the symbolism of iron and clay, the symbioses of state and religion. When religious authorities use state power for their own agenda of oppressing other religions, freedom is suppressed.

The prophetic part of the book (7–12) presents an attack of a religio-political power against God's people. The little horn crushes and seeks to annihilate the saints of the Most High (Daniel 7:25; 8:12, 25). This antigodly power persecutes God's faithful followers. The saints of the Most High God go through severe oppression, but God pronounces judgment in their favor (Daniel 7:22). On the other hand, the persecuting power of the little horn is condemned and supernaturally destroyed (Daniel 7:26; 8:25). No one helps the oppressor; no one is for him.

The book of Daniel, the book for the time of the end (the word “end” is used 27 times, and the specific phrase “the time of the end” is employed 5 times [e.g., Daniel 8:17; 11:35, 40; 12:4, 9]), presents a sober picture in regard to human rights. There is no respect for religious liberty at the end of world history. These stories and prophecies are



challenges to us; life is and will be difficult, because tragedies occur when God is absent in the lives of people or when authorities play God.

Even though the prophetic word predicts that there will be religious persecution again, it does not lead into a pattern of fatalism or passive resignation and should not be understood as an indication of a deterministic mentality. No attitude of “I can do nothing” is envisioned here. God tells us these things so that we may act, stand for religious liberty, and do the maximum to change the flow of history.

The dominant thought and the most crucial motif in the book of Daniel is the theme of divine judgment. God is our Judge (the name Daniel means God is my Judge), and we are all under His judgment! He has the final word; humans are not in charge, they can only play God. With this prevalent concept the book starts (Daniel 1:1-2), climaxes at the center (7:9-14), and ends (Daniel 12:13); and in between each story or prophetic section is packed with the theme of judgment (Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45; 3:22-27; 4:33, 37; 5:22-28; 6:23-24; 8:25; 9:7, 11, 16, 24-27; 11:45). At the judgment God will reveal who is who, demonstrate that He always stands on the side of the persecuted (Daniel 3:29; 6:27; 7:22; 12:1-2; compare with Isaiah 63:9), and as the Revealer of history will unmask the character and fate of all persecutors who will get their just punishment while the persecuted receive their great reward.

At the end of time when everything is in turmoil and no one, humanly speaking, is for God’s people, the book of Daniel tells us that Michael, the great heavenly prince (Daniel 12:1), will stand up for them and deliver them from the hand of their enemies who are associated with the little horn and the king of the north. God will intervene, and those who teach and lead others to righteousness will be resurrected and rescued (Daniel 12:2, 13). They will receive eternal life. This is the beautiful climax of the book which gives to the persecuted hope and courage to live and persevere.

Paradoxically, persecution brings witnessing possibilities which otherwise would be impossible. Witnessing to the mighty of the earth sometimes brings new unexpected converts to God who in turn can be a light to many highly influential and positioned people (see for example Nebuchadnezzar’s conversion story and testimony in Daniel 4). Being respectful but at the same time straightforward is the best response to the powerful. One never knows what good fruit it may bear.

The book of Daniel teaches us lessons about religious tolerance and intolerance and how we

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should deal with religious convictions—with Truth. We can love the truth, know the truth, search for the truth, understand the truth, divide the truth,

proclaim the truth, hate the truth, twist the truth, deny the truth, etc., but we cannot possess the truth! Truth (with a capital T) can only possess us, and on the condition that we allow God to do it for and in us. His word is Truth. Possessors of truth are very dangerous. They are exploiters and emotional abusers of others. Where there are strong fanatical religious convictions, there may also be religious intolerance! Envy and pride certainly lead to depriving people of their freedom of conscience.

Babylon, a false religious system, uses violence, oppression, and lies, and it enslaves. The spirit of Babylon is ever present where people hate each other, fight against each other, do not speak with one another, abuse, misuse power and positions, are not willing to forgive, are stubborn, or attack the motives of others.

Not only wicked people persecute. The “good” people do as well when they insist that others must do everything according to their views, and when they impose on others their own understanding of truth, assuming that the “bad” are always the others. Persecutors think that they are the possessors of truth! This is why I am afraid of people who think they are always right.