

# **Daniel and the King's Food**

*One Study from Daniel on Standing  
for Truth in a Hostile World*

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Myrtlefield Sermons



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## Why all the Fuss?

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. (Dan 1:8)

It was no surprise for Daniel when one gloomy morning he found himself marched unceremoniously out of Jerusalem down the road that led into exile in Babylon. Naturally he was depressed to see his native land come under the domination of a foreign invader with all the misery and humiliation that that involved, but it didn't surprise him. Nor did it shake his faith, but rather confirmed it. After all it was just what the prophet Jeremiah had said would happen and to Daniel's youthful mind there was no prophet like Jeremiah.

Jeremiah had not been quite so popular with all his contemporaries, and no wonder. He had ferociously denounced their religious humbug and the superstition with which so many Jews at the time had tried to cushion themselves against reality. Jerusalem and its people, he had thundered, were rotten, morally rotten, and their religion stank. Divorced from social concern and business ethic, compromised in its theology by an *advanced* liberal attitude to the monstrous superstitions of the heathen cults, their religion amounted to little more than a meaningless ritual, a specious substitute for faith in the living God and for personal and national righteousness which a relationship with that God demanded. The nation might be, and indeed was, God's chosen people. He didn't dispute that, but their hearts were deceitful above all things and desperately sick (Jer 17:9). Their self-deception and rationalising hypocrisy had removed all reality from their professed faith in God. But precisely because the God of Israel was real and not a figment of their imagination, they might expect the Babylonian armies to overrun Jerusalem, sack the city and destroy the temple.

God would not only allow it, he would order it. He would use the Babylonians to chastise the nation, whose glaring social evils and hypocritical religion had become obnoxious to him and totally unacceptable. What did God care for a few golden temple vessels? His honour did not depend upon them, or on a supposedly sacred temple either.

It was unpopular preaching, but it rang true; and Daniel had long since taken it for granted that Jerusalem would fall. Now that it had happened, it was almost a relief. The gloom and fear of waiting for the disaster was over. He had at least survived, and though he was going into exile there was nothing he could have done even if they had let him stay. Jerusalem could not now be saved from destruction and, if Jeremiah was right, once destroyed, Jerusalem would not be restored in his lifetime. Israel was on the shelf and would stay there for a long time yet as far as he could see. Perhaps God was going to give the Gentiles a chance of leading the world to its longed-for age of peace and joy and plenty that Isaiah and other Jewish

prophets had talked so much about, but which had never come yet. Anyhow, it would be interesting to see this big Gentile world and study it at close quarters, to see how they looked at life and what programmes they had for improving it. Life had become a bit cooped up in Jerusalem recently, what with the siege and the interminable arguments, intrigues, tensions and shortages. Whatever lay ahead, he was at least on the move!

Babylon when he got there, proved to be quite a city. First the skyline, and then the sweeping vistas along the main avenues and the enormous buildings overwhelmed him with their sheer size, the audacity of their proportions, the sheer genius of the planning and the technology that had carried it out. The poets back home raved about Jerusalem city, but Babylon made Jerusalem look like a shanty town in the outback. And it was not just hard, efficient-but-unimaginative technology either; there was a riot of aesthetic wealth for the human spirit to revel in: the architecture of the buildings—novel, daring, futuristic; the bas-relief work decorating the walls of the state buildings; and the fabulous gardens. Just look at those statues over there in front of that building—what a sense of power and meaning they conveyed. That would be a temple, of course, so here was idolatry on its home ground. There was no doubt what Jeremiah would have said about these statues, but what was wrong with a system of thought that could stimulate the human spirit to produce such visually enriching works of art? On the other hand, was it true—the worldview that this art represented? But then again, did truth matter in art? Daniel's mind was in a whirl.

As the days went by Daniel became increasingly aware of another whole dimension of life that had just not existed at all back home. In Judaea they had their wise men, in a tradition that went back to Solomon and before. But their wisdom consisted of endless individual bits of knowledge about herbs and trees and animals, with some practical insight into human behaviour based on experience.

They had all this here in Babylon too, but they had something else that was different. It was their approach to these things. They not only had names for the stars for instance, like they did back home, but they theorised on the relations between them and on their possible influence in the earth, and they were for ever trying to work out what these relations were. They weren't content, as they were back home, just to say that God made it all and kept it all going. They had observed the risings and settings of the constellations and planets, they had recorded their timings, and they had begun to construct theories to explain what made it happen and how it all worked.

It was exciting! And it was even more exciting when, instead of being drafted into the labour gangs as he expected, Daniel was brought before a selection committee and along with a few of his friends offered a place in the university. They had in mind, they said, to school him for a place in the Babylonian civil service, and an academic course at a university would be good background training. Daniel seized the opportunity with both hands. Here was a chance to learn, to investigate life, the world, history, man<sup>1</sup> himself—to be trained in this new scientific approach to things, and to truth itself. Here in the university, moreover, he wouldn't

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article the term *man* is used for humankind, men and women.

be troubled by difficult questions of faith, always a touchy problem between Gentiles and Jews. Here it would be simply a matter of scientific approach to truth.

And then the shock came, at dinner the first night of term in the college dining hall. The food was magnificent, for this was Imperial College. The emperor himself was the patron, and the students were served with food from the high table at which he often dined. But before anyone was allowed to eat, the food was first offered to the state idols. Idol worship in the university—Daniel was dumbfounded. He turned hot and then cold. Jewish inhibitions and revulsions, fear of unknown consequences if he refused to eat, pangs of conscience if he did, thoughts of Jeremiah, the feeling that somehow all his folks at home were relying on him not to let them down. The overwhelming sense of loneliness and of being odd amid the unquestioned normal behaviour of this dining room full of students was overwhelming. He felt suddenly indecisive and lost; his stomach turned over. Even if he had wanted to he couldn't do more than pick at the food.

In a moment he turned to the nearest Babylonian student and asked what the ceremony meant.

'What ceremony? Oh, that was Marduk's offering. We always do that here; it's one of the traditions. It used to be a different god once before Nebuchadnezzar became boss, but he likes Marduk.'

'Do you believe in it?' asked Daniel.

'Believe in what?'

'In the existence of gods and all that.'

The student spluttered into his soup. 'Hey!' he called out across the table, 'there's a Jewish fresher here who wants to know if we believe in the gods.'

'We believe in Ishtar,' said a third year man from the other side of the table. 'What do you Jews call her? In some languages they call her Aphrodite, or Venus. But it comes to the same thing. Some of us are going to her temple straight after dinner, why don't you come with us?'

'Don't take any notice of him,' said the first student. 'He's only a good-time boy. Anyway, don't worry yourself about our idols; we don't! You will soon get used to it.'

'But aren't you concerned about the question whether it's true, whether these gods exist?' said Daniel. 'After all, this is supposed to be a university!'

'You're like all freshers, always taking things far too seriously. You'll find out after you've been here for a while. Anyway, what do you believe?'

'I believe in just one God, Jehovah,' said Daniel, 'who created the heaven and the earth and everything that's in it.'

'O, come off it!' said the first chap. 'You wouldn't be sitting here if that were true. Didn't you Jews all pray like mad to Jehovah to save you from our armies? A fat lot of help he gave you! The fact is your god is only one among many, and our god Marduk was just that little bit too good for him! Aren't there some golden vessels out of Jehovah's temple sitting right now in Marduk's temple up the road? You see, it just isn't logical to imagine there's only one God. I mean, what makes things grow, and then what makes them die again? It isn't logical to think the same god does both! Take our armies, for instance. Sometimes when the war-god gets into them they fight like demons. Another time, for no reason at all they panic. You see, it's two different gods that get hold of them at different times. It's not just the men acting for

themselves, is it? When the goddess of love gets into a fellow he cannot help himself, and it doesn't matter whose girl or wife he falls for, does it?

'Yes it does!' said Daniel. 'That is a rotten and debasing attitude. If what you say is true, man is nothing but a slave of forces which he cannot control, and any hope of moral progress is dead before you start.'

'But we believe in morality as much as you Jews do,' protested the Babylonian. 'We believe that to be pleasing to the gods a man must always do what is right. "Do not return evil to the man who disputes with you, requite with kindness your evil doer, maintain justice to your enemy, let not your heart be induced to evil. Give food to eat, beer to drink; the one begging for alms, give honour and clothes—in this a man's god takes pleasure. It is pleasing to Shamash who will repay him with favour. Be helpful, do good."<sup>2</sup> You see, I'm not the heathen you think I am. I know my ethics!'

'Very good,' said Daniel, 'but who exactly is Shamash?'

'The Sun-god, of course; he is the judge of heaven and earth.'

'O, I see,' said Daniel, 'but what happens when some other god disagrees with Shamash as to what is good? What happens, for instance, if some chap, instead of giving his enemy justice tortures him, and then claims that Ishtar, the violent goddess of war, made him do it?'

'Ah well, Marduk looks after that. He is the chief of all the gods.'

'And does everybody acknowledge him as the chief and absolute moral ruler?' asked Daniel.

'Well, not everybody. In ancient times it used to be Anu and Enlil, but people had very primitive ideas in those days. The Assyrians claimed that Anu was the chief god, but we maintain that Marduk is.'

'Sounds to me that you make up your own morality,' said Daniel.

'No we don't—but you surely aren't going to say that the Assyrians were right. A rotten lot they were, and would be still if given the chance.'

'Yes, I know,' said Daniel. 'I know what they did to Israel and what they tried to do to Judah. But what worries me is that you seem to be saying that morality in the end is not the same for everybody. Ultimately, it depends on what god you choose to believe in and what standards of morality you choose to attribute to him.'

'Well I suppose it all comes to the same thing in the end,' said the Babylonian. 'But personally I put my money on Sin, the moon god, as the final judge of heaven and earth. You see we can actually prove that he does affect people's minds, especially when he's at his full powers and exerting his maximum influence on the earth. He can even send people crazy if they've offended him.'

'Pretty unstable kind of god himself,' said Daniel. 'First he waxes, then he wanes, and sometimes blacks out altogether.'

'That's when the demons attack him, but then we can all help by offering sacrifices to strengthen him in his fight against the demons. That's the glory of it; man has such a great and noble part to play in the fight against evil.'

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<sup>2</sup> Cf modernized text by Prof. J. S. Arkenberg in Paul Halsall (ed.), *Internet Ancient History Sourcebook*, 'The Advice of an Akkadian Father to His Son, c.2200 BCE', [online] <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/2200akkad-father.asp> (accessed 27 April 2016).

'But what kind of saviour god is that,' said Daniel, 'if you have first got to save him before he can save you? I don't call that salvation at all. Sounds to me too much like man in the end having to be his own saviour, and the gods' as well.'

'There you are,' said the Babylonian, 'that's just typical of you narrow-minded Jews. You think that your god Jehovah is the only god there is, instead of recognising that all religions are striving towards the same goal in the end. But you'll find out—three years in this place will knock that narrow-minded exclusivism out of your head and make you a much more broad-minded and civilized fellow!'

Daniel and his three Jewish companions, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, met for a long discussion that evening in Daniel's study-bedroom. Daniel was seething and held forth at great length. 'And they call themselves intellectuals!' he was saying. 'There they are, deifying their own sexual impulses and animal instincts. Why, the merest peasant back home would know better than that. Just listen to that chap talking about the temple-girls and the goddess Ishtar. It's nothing but a rationalisation of immorality, if you ask me.'

'But they're not all like that,' interrupted Meshach. 'For most of them their idolatry, as you call it, is a serious and responsible attempt to explain the universe. I know we don't agree with it, but you've got to admit that they're not all exactly idiots. You don't build a superb city like this, and run an empire the size theirs is, without some brains in your head somewhere.'

'So holding that the moon's blackouts are caused by the bad gods fighting the good gods, that's a sign of brains, is it?' said Daniel.

'Well, I'm not saying that that's what makes it happen,' said Meshach, 'but it could be. After all, we just don't know what causes it, and I think we should keep an open mind on it.'

'But don't you believe in Genesis any more?' broke in Shadrach.

'Of course I believe in Genesis,' said Meshach, 'just as much as you do. I believe God made the moon, and the sun and stars too for that matter. But the Bible doesn't tell us why the moon blacks out once in a while, and it doesn't explain how it does it—the mechanisms, I mean. The Bible isn't that kind of book. Genesis was written to tell us that it was God who made the world, and I believe it; but it doesn't tell us how he made it or what mechanism he uses to keep it going. If God chooses to let some demon black the moon out, and then has some minor god or other put it right again, I don't see that contradicts our faith in him as Creator. He's still in charge.'

'*But that just will not do!*' said Daniel, emphasising every word as he said it. 'And I'll tell you why it won't do. God can use any mechanism he likes to black the moon out—we all admit that—and you can call the mechanism what you like. But there's only one thing you must not do, and that's call it a god and start worshipping it. That's precisely what they do.'

'Well, maybe,' said Meshach, 'but they do also believe in one supreme God just like we do, don't they?'

'No they don't,' said Daniel, 'that's just what they don't do. They talk about a supreme God like you do, but they don't mean what you mean. Their supreme God may appear to rule over all the others but when you really push them to say what they believe about their supreme God, he's just as much a part of Nature and a product of the primeval matter of the universe as all their other demi-gods and demi-semi-gods. He was born from the primeval

monsters of the deep, or something like that, they say. I tell you straight, they do not believe in the Creator, independent of and apart from his creation, self-existent and absolute. They have long since given up on him. When they talk of the gods, or the supreme God, they are simply talking about the great powers and forces in the universe, not of the real Creator. That's what makes their idolatry so deadly. It's a substitute for faith in the true God; it's a worshipping of the creation in the place of the Creator. I admit I don't know what makes the moon black out; but whatever causes it, I for one am not going to compromise my faith by using their language and calling it a god.'

After that long speech they all fell quiet for a minute or two, until Abednego voiced what was on all their minds. 'What are we going to do tomorrow?' Are we going to eat the food in the dining hall, or aren't we?'

'Well, I'm not going to eat it,' said Shadrach. 'If what Daniel says is right I don't see how we can eat it.'

'So you'll starve then, I suppose,' said Abednego. 'And what do you suppose Nebuchadnezzar will say about that, when he finds out that we don't accept his theory about the gods, and particularly about his favourite god that he believes put him in power? We've got to look at things from the practical point of view. All right, so we don't believe in his theories about his gods. But personally, I still don't see why we need to make a fuss about it. After all, we've got to make a go of our university course, otherwise there's nothing for us but the labour gangs. Why can't we just eat without making a fuss about it? I mean, eating their food doesn't mean that we believe in their gods!'

'That's what I say,' said Meshach, 'and I'll tell you something else. Doesn't Isaiah say somewhere that the Gentiles' idols are a nothing, really? They can't see or hear or feel. Well then, since the old stone idol that they offer the food to in the dining hall is a nothing, I don't see what harm it can do us to eat the food, especially when we don't believe in the idol anyway.'

'But the Babylonians believe in it,' said Daniel. 'They believe that when the image was consecrated, an actual god really came to dwell in it. For them, the offering of the food to the image is an integral part of their belief that the universe is run by gods. All right, if they must believe that kind of thing, well so they must. But this is what gets me—why should I be compelled to pretend that I believe their theory just because I want to take a university course? It isn't as if their theory has been proved true. It hasn't; it's only their belief. I don't see why I should be compelled in the name of learning and science to pretend to believe it. I don't, and I'm not going to. I believe what Moses says—man is made in the image of God to have dominion over Nature, not to grovel before the supposed storm god and offer victims to the moon, just because we don't understand how they work. In the name of God and human dignity and science itself, I'm not going to grovel!'

'And I'll tell you another thing: if we don't make our stand now we never will. We have to make up our minds now. One of these days there will be a graduation ceremony or passing out parade, or something. All of us students will be assembled in our special gowns, they'll ring a bell or blow a trumpet, and we shall all be expected to bow down before the image. What shall we do about that? And what if Meshach here is picked as the best student of the year to offer the ceremonial cakes to Marduk?'



'I wouldn't do it,' said Meshach. 'I am a believer in God!'

'I wouldn't do it either,' said Shadrach.

'Then what exactly are we going to do tomorrow?' said Abednego.

What they did the next day was to go and see the principal of the college. He, of course, couldn't see what all the fuss was about. He thought it was ridiculous, carrying their Jewish religion to such absurd lengths as to reject good food—it was lamentably narrow-minded and ungrateful of them. The food given to undergraduates, he pointed out, was a special diet provided by His Majesty to boost their health. It was more than his job, or indeed his life, was worth to alter the diet. They could have a word with the chief steward if they wished. Perhaps he could rustle up something direct from the kitchens that had never been served to the king's table nor offered to the god. But if their health broke down and the king found out, they were to understand clearly that they weren't to say that the principal had given permission. He took no responsibility for it whatsoever.

So they had a word with the steward, and he said that they could have porridge straight from the kitchen for a trial period; and if their health didn't suffer they could go on having it as their regular diet.

Their health didn't suffer! In fact, in finals they all took firsts and Nebuchadnezzar was delighted. He never knew about the porridge!

For Daniel and his companions, however, it was an enormously important decision. It had challenged all their youthful idealism and called up their martyr spirit. They felt that they were taking on the whole world in their stand for truth. But when later in life Daniel could look back on the incident and see it in its true proportion, he still felt it significant enough to make it the first chapter in his book. In a way it was basic to all that he had to say. Throughout his long life, much of it spent in the high ranks of government service, he had plenty of opportunity to study Babylonian, and then Persian, civilisation in detail and at close quarters, and there was much of it he admired. But he became increasingly convinced that civilizations built on the premises of polytheism, on the deification of matter, of elemental forces and of man's psychological urges could never lead to world peace and to the golden age of fulfilment and satisfaction that everybody longed for.

His arguments with the Babylonians were of course conducted in the Akkadian language and thought forms. To see their relevance to us we must translate them into their modern equivalents. The basic issue remains the same. Many of the forces and objects that the Babylonians worshipped as gods were real enough. Their fault was, as Paul would put it, 'they worshipped and served the creation rather than the Creator' (Rom 1:25). Today atheists of one sort or another laugh at the ancient world for its polytheism and its idols. They have long since got rid of them. They think in fact that they have had the intellectual courage to go the whole road and they have banished not only polytheism but monotheism as well. They have got rid of the whole concept of god—one or many—and are left, so they think, with freedom.

But what are they really left with? Well, just matter and energy—both of them by definition mindless, purposeless and irrational—so that everything and everyone that now is has arrived at its present state by evolution out of the basic constituents, matter and energy.

But what of this evolution? In the popular mind it is doubtless a goddess, every bit as much as an ancient goddess. Her name is frequently spelled with a capital letter, *Evolution*. She controls, directs, accounts for the change of this organ, and the function of that. Actually, she doesn't exist at all. There is no such thing or force (still less, mind or purpose) as Evolution. At the best, evolution is only a name put by some scientists on a process through which they see, or think they see, matter going; and according to them the process is as blind and mindless as the matter and energy which is going through the process.

What, then, controls this process? Ultimately, chance. Many of the ancients were inclined to agree, only they called *chance* a goddess. The difference is minimal. In the end what is the relation of man and his mind to this combination of blind matter and purposeless energy controlled by mindless chance? Does man control them, or they him? Obviously this is a question that we need to ask, if we are going to talk about gaining freedom to develop by getting rid of the idea of a personal purposeful creator. And the answer to the question is: without any doubt they control him at the practical level. Naturally he does his best to control or at least cajole them, as the ancient did his gods. Eventually he dies, in spite of all his efforts, and there is nothing that he can do to stop it.

At the logical level too, it is obvious that they control him. If man and his mind are nothing but the chance product of mindless matter worked on by blind forces, it makes no logical sense to talk of man controlling this mindless matter and these blind forces which constitute his own mind. Those who have the thoroughness to take their materialistic evolutionary theories to their logical conclusion hold that it is man's cells and genes that determine him and his behaviour, and his so-called thinking. Man, they conclude, is a pre-set machine; he has no real freedom. These mindless things are his masters, and by definition will always remain so. Of course he tries to understand them by his science so that he can then cajole them by his technology; but they prove endlessly more complex than he anticipates, and they remain his masters.

But men have aspirations! Yes, and other men have other aspirations. Who shall say which are good and which are bad, which ought to triumph and which should be suppressed, when there is no ultimate court of appeal except blind matter and mindless forces? The only hope of a golden age would be if in the end the conflicting forces came into some kind of equilibrium. Till then you may expect the forces to fight among themselves every bit as much as the ancient gods and goddesses, and just as arbitrarily and irrationally as those gods and goddesses are reputed to have fought among themselves, with the battle going on all the time at a level beyond man's power to control it.

The fact is that ancient man was talking ultimately about the same matter and forces as we are, though the ancients did not understand so much about them as we do (and we do not understand all that much). The ancients said that these things were in control of the universe and of man and man's affairs. Since they were much more powerful than he was, he called them gods and goddesses, hoping that they were more sensible as well as more powerful, though it was rarely apparent that they were. The modern atheist agrees with the ancient

polytheist that these things are in control. He calls them not gods and goddesses but atoms, protons, neutrons, cells, genes, forces—but it makes little difference. According to him they still produce and control this world, and beyond and above their mindless workings there is no Creator, no Mind, in whose love and wisdom man's own love and reason can confidently trust. Man is the prisoner of irrational forces.

Why, then, do men believe the theory of atheistic evolution? Are they forced to it by the evidence, by rigorous inescapable logic? No! The theory, even according to some of its propounders themselves, is unproved and unprovable. To accept it as truth is as much an act of faith as believing in a Creator, except that by definition the atheist's act of faith implies that his mind, logic and reason—his aesthetic sense and his love—are the products of blind forces working by purposeless chance upon mindless matter, and therefore ultimately meaningless. It is surely the strangest of strange things how this anti-intellectualist theory has come to be the unquestioned—and in some quarters the unquestionable—basic constituent in so many academic courses, and served up as though it were proven fact to schoolchildren, undergraduates and the general public. Isn't it time that a few more people in the name of reason itself protested at the food?

Mercifully, there is scarcely an atheist living who is prepared to swallow his atheism neat and undiluted. Even the most extreme of them seem, in spite of their presuppositions, to hold that there are real values in life. Humanity, they maintain, is valuable and ought to be loved. Everyone ought to have a social conscience and love his fellow—or the state, or someone or ones. But then values and duties cannot be derived logically from their atheistic premises. You cannot logically turn an *ought* into an *is*. If the truth were told they have pinched these values and duties out of the temple of Jehovah and, like Nebuchadnezzar, installed them in the temples of their own ideologies where logically they do not belong. But you will never produce a golden age for man on the basis of atheistic ideology decorated with a few golden vessels stolen from the worship of Jehovah.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.