

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Daniel & Esther

SIXTY BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

Phil Moore

MONARCH
BOOKS

Introduction: It is God Who Put You Here

“Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

(Esther 4:14)

If you want to understand the message of the books of Daniel and Esther in the Old Testament, then it may help to think about a famous moment in the movie *The Imitation Game*. One of the Bletchley Park codebreakers cannot hide his frustration at being tucked away in a stately home, working on maths puzzles, while all his friends are away fighting on the battlefield. He seethes with frustration, and asks whether anyone realizes that there are actually soldiers who are *fighting* to win the war. His brother is risking his life in the navy. His cousins are RAF pilots. In his view, all his friends are contributing to the war whilst he is wasting his time, producing *nothing*.¹

Benedict Cumberbatch and Keira Knightley hang their heads because they too suspect that this is true. There is little to show for their efforts to crack the German Enigma code. There are just as many bombs falling, just as many people are dying and there is just as little hope of a swift end to the war as when they began their lonely exile to Bletchley Park. The power of the scene, of course, lies in the fact that we know they went on to crack the code, shortening World War Two by over two years and saving over 20 million lives. Their frustration, while understandable, is utterly unfounded. They may constantly

¹ The codebreaker, Peter Hilton, in *The Imitation Game* (Black Bear Pictures, 2014).

doubt it, but they are in precisely the right place to change the course of history.

That's also how it was for Daniel, a young Jewish teenager torn from his hometown of Jerusalem and taken into exile in Babylon as a prisoner of war. Any dream of serving the Lord to save his nation from foreign invasion was cruelly dashed, and he was forced to serve as a civil servant in the evil empire that had just destroyed his hopes and his home. We know that Daniel wrote the book that bears his name, both from the book itself (Daniel 9:2 and 10:2) and from the words of Jesus (Matthew 24:15), yet – remarkably – we find in it no trace of self-pity or despair. Daniel saw things far too clearly for that. His book is listed among the *Major Prophets* because his insights into the future are amongst the clearest and most astonishing in the Bible.² Instead of looking back in anger, he looked forward in faith, believing that the Lord must have a better plan than his. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, Daniel reassured himself: *It is God who put you here.*

Daniel 1–6 tells the story of Daniel, revealing him to be **God's man in Babylon**. We discover that he was able to achieve far more by serving the Lord's plans for the Jewish nation in Babylon than he could ever have achieved had he remained in Jerusalem. First, his devout faithfulness rallies the Jewish exiles back to faith in the God of Israel. Then, his courageous witness persuades the evil King Nebuchadnezzar, the destroyer of Jerusalem, to surrender his own life to the God of Israel as well. When the Babylonian Empire is eclipsed by that of Persia, Daniel remains at his post and leads his new Persian master to faith in the God of Israel too. These are some of the most famous chapters in the Old Testament, and they were written to encourage us that we are also in the right place. Whenever

² Ironically, this is why some modern scholars deny that Daniel wrote the book which bears his name. They insist that nobody could have prophesied so accurately about the next 400 years of history, which says more about their view of God than it does their view of the book of Daniel. See *Isaiah 41:21–24 and 46:8–11*.

we are tempted to doubt it, these chapters reassure us: *It is God who put you here.*³

Whenever we are tempted to imagine that we are living in the wrong city, attending the wrong church, working in the wrong job, married to the wrong person or investing in the wrong friends, the book of Daniel reminds us that the Lord's plans are always greater than our own. The Apostle Paul echoes the book of Daniel when he reassures us that *"God set the exact times and places where people should live."*⁴

Daniel 7–12 consists of a series of prophecies that apply this same message to **God's people in the world**. They predict in astonishing detail what will happen over the next few centuries of Jewish history until the coming of the Messiah, who will establish a far greater Kingdom than all the empires that will rise and fall in between. I am looking forward to studying those chapters with you because they are some of the most difficult chapters in the Bible to understand, and some of the most rewarding chapters when we do. Through them, the Lord includes us in Daniel's story. *It is God who put you here.*

The book of **Esther** forms a natural companion to the book of Daniel, since it records the story of **God's woman in Persia**. Esther had even more reason to despair than Daniel. Born a Jewish exile, she was orphaned young and brought up by a cousin. Her hope of marrying a nice Jewish boy was dashed when she was suddenly conscripted into the Persian emperor's harem. Horrified to find herself a plaything in a pagan palace, she was shaken still further to discover that her new husband had passed a law that would result in the massacre of the Jewish community across the Persian Empire. Her cousin echoes the book of Daniel when he asks her in Esther 4:14: *"Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"* He reassured Esther: *It is God who put you here.*

³ Daniel was written in the sixth century BC and Esther was written in the fifth century BC, yet the Apostle Paul insists in Romans 15:4 that these books were written to teach us *endurance, encouragement and hope*.

⁴ This is my paraphrase of the Greek text of Acts 17:26.

The books of Daniel and Esther emphasize that the Lord is *omnipotent* – that he is the almighty and undisputed ruler of everything that happens everywhere. Daniel achieves this by telling us explicitly and repeatedly that the God of Israel is sovereign over every earthly kingdom. Esther takes a more subtle approach. By omitting to mention the name of God at all, while revealing his handiwork on every page, our eyes are opened to the invisible work of God in our own lives.⁵ However godless and mundane the details of our life stories may appear to us, the sovereignty of God is written on every page.

The books of Daniel and Esther emphasize that the Lord is *omniscient* – that he is the all-wise and all-knowing architect of history. None of us could ever have guessed that the disasters which befell Daniel would give rise to a spiritual revival for the Jews and a surprise conversion for the king of Babylon. Nor could we ever have imagined that Esther's defilement by a Persian king would save the Jewish nation from genocide and lead to many more surprise conversions among the pagans. And yet the Lord planned it all.

So thank you for taking the time to journey through these two books of the Bible with me. You will not regret time spent discovering what they speak into our own lives today. As Christians, we inhabit the modern-day equivalents of Babylon and Persia, and we have many reasons to throw up our hands in despair. That's why, wherever you are and whatever your circumstances, the Lord wants to use these two books to invite you to acknowledge, with the same faith as Daniel and Esther, that *it is God who put you here*.

⁵ This makes Esther the only book in the Bible not to mention God by name. Song of Songs can feel equally secular, but at least the Hebrew text of Song of Songs 8:6 refers to "*the flame of the Lord*".

Part One

God's Man in Babylon (Daniel 1–6)

The End of the World (Daniel 1:1–5)

“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”

(Daniel 1:1)

At the start of the twenty-first century, every CEO had a *2020 Vision* for their business. It was meant to be a play on words, a jokey claim that the CEO possessed a perfect vision of the future which ought to motivate employees to turn that vision into reality. But when 2020 arrived, the joke turned sour. Nobody had predicted that COVID-19 would devastate their business, eclipse their vision statements and silence their boasting. Their *2020 Visions* became sobering reminders of what the Bible says in James 4:13–14: *“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.”*

We don't know what Daniel would have written on his *605 BC Vision*, but what we do know is that 605 BC proved even more devastating to his world than 2020 proved to ours. For Daniel, the events of 605 BC must have felt like it was the end of the world.

The year 605 BC was the year that saw the rise of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. First, the crown prince shifted the balance of power in the ancient world by crushing the Egyptian and Assyrian armies at the Battle of Carchemish. Then, just as the world became Babylon's for the taking, news arrived that King Nabopolassar had died. Nebuchadnezzar succeeded his

father to become the greatest and longest-reigning king of Babylon. Like an unstoppable coronavirus, he spread his empire into every nation.

This was also the year that the nation of Judah definitively rejected the Word of God. We can read about what happened in Jeremiah 36, where King Jehoiakim is granted a private reading of a first edition of the book of Jeremiah.¹ Instead of repenting, he slices the book into pieces, throws the pieces on the fire and orders the arrest of the prophet. This violent rejection of God's Word marked a major turning point in Jewish history.

As a result, 605 BC became the year in which the city of Jerusalem fell to its enemies for the first time. A century earlier, the Lord had rescued the capital city of Judah from an Assyrian army due to the repentance of King Hezekiah and the prayers of the prophet Isaiah. King Jehoiakim's refusal to repent and to partner with the prophet Jeremiah meant that the city fell to the Babylonians after the Battle of Carchemish. Foreign soldiers plundered its royal palaces, its treasuries and its holy Temple. They also plundered its citizens by taking 7,000 young Jewish men into exile in Babylon – not just as trophies of war to sell at the slave markets, but as gifted students young enough to be brainwashed into serving as loyal officials for the growing Babylonian Empire.²

The opening verses of the book of Daniel inform us therefore that 605 BC was the year in which the gods of Babylon seemed to triumph over the God of Israel.³ Since the name Nebuchadnezzar means *May-The-God-Nebo-Help-My-Crown-Prince*,

¹ Jewish historians counted part years as whole years, so 605 BC is the *fourth* year of Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 36:1. Like us, the Babylonians only counted whole years, so 605 BC is the *third* year of Jehoiakim in Daniel 1:1.

² The exile of 605 BC was the largest of the four Jewish deportations, involving 7,000 men, plus their families. The deportations of 597 BC, 586 BC and 581 BC involved 3,023 men, 832 men and 745 men, plus their families. See Jeremiah 52:28–30 and 2 Kings 24:14, where the figure of 10,000 combines 605 BC and 597 BC.

³ By referring to Babylonia as Shinar, Daniel 1:2 takes us back to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:2. Daniel wants us to grasp that 605 BC looked like the triumph of the children of Babel over the children of Abraham.

it looked as though his father's prayer had been answered when he entered the Temple of the Lord and took back some of its sacred objects as plunder to the temple of his own idol in Babylon.⁴

Daniel was among the 7,000 Jewish young men who were carted back to Babylon with the treasures from God's Temple, so 605 BC must have felt like the end of the world for him personally. It dashed any dream that the teenager might have had of working with the prophet Jeremiah to bring spiritual revival to the Jewish nation.⁵ It ruined any hope that he might have had of his aristocratic family securing him a post at the royal palace, from which he might become a godly influence on the kings of Judah. Instead, he was forced to serve the monstrous empire that had just torn him away from his parents and from the Promised Land. It took several months to travel from Jerusalem to Babylon, so it must have felt like the end of the world to Daniel in every way.⁶

Have you got that? Then you are ready for the message of the book of Daniel, because the Lord does more than dash the hopes and dreams of CEOs for their businesses. He also dashes the hopes and dreams of his followers for how they can serve him. The book of Daniel demonstrates that God is not looking for generals who can assist him with clever strategies for the advance of his Kingdom. He is looking for foot soldiers who trust that he alone knows the best strategy and who say a simple "yes" to his commands. The year 605 BC felt like the end of the world for Daniel and his contemporaries, but these opening verses hint at two ways in which it would spell revival for the Jewish nation.

⁴ *Nebo* (also known as *Nabu*) was worshipped as the son of *Bel* (also known as *Marduk*), who was the patron god of Babylon. Daniel 4:8 suggests that the Babylonian idol referred to in 1:2 is *Bel*, rather than *Nebo*.

⁵ The age of the 7,000 exiles is not given, but the Hebrew text describes them literally as "lads". Daniel 6 tells us that he was still working in government in 538 BC, so he must have been a teenager in 605 BC.

⁶ It took four months for the news of the fall of Jerusalem to reach Babylonia in Ezekiel 33:21. It also took four months for some of the exiles to return from Babylon to Jerusalem in Ezra 7:8–9.

First, these opening verses tell us that the events of 605 BC granted Jewish believers access to the throne room of Babylon. The breaching of the walls of Jerusalem did not mark the end of Jewish history. It marked the moment when its faith went global. The arrival of 7,000 Jews in Babylon marked one of the greatest missionary moments in the Old Testament. It was the beginning of the Jewish conquest of Babylon.

Second, these opening verses tell us that the events of 605 BC sowed the seeds for the return of the Jewish exiles to the Promised Land. The sacred articles that are plundered from the Lord's Temple by King Nebuchadnezzar become very important later. We are informed in Daniel 5 that the Lord regarded the mistreatment of these vessels as mistreatment of himself, so when the king of Babylon used them to raise a toast to his own idols, it directly caused the fall of Babylon to the Persian army in 539 BC.⁷

From that perspective, 605 BC was not the end of the world for the Jewish nation. Like the famous Trojan Horse in Greek mythology, it marked the moment when God's people breached the walls of Babylon. We must never forget that God marches to victory on the death-and-resurrection highway. Even when he looks defeated, he knows precisely what he is doing.

So if your own world feels like it is in tatters right now, be encouraged. If your own plans for serving God have ended in failure, then do not despair. Whenever you find yourself in a hopeless place, remember the message of Daniel: *It is God who put you here.*

⁷ Ezra 1:7–11 tells us that all of these sacred articles were returned to Jerusalem in 538 BC. The Lord is able to recover all of his lost property! Acts 9:4–5 echoes Daniel 5 by informing us that Jesus also views the mistreatment of his followers, who are his New Covenant Temple, as mistreatment of himself.

How it All Begins (Daniel 1:3–8)

“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine....”

(Daniel 1:8)

King Nebuchadnezzar had a plan for how it would all begin. When news of his father's death arrived at his army camp, he performed a quick calculation in his head. There were not enough gifted men in the city Babylon to administer an empire as large as the one that he imagined, so he conscripted some of the finest captives from his Carchemish campaign and created a civil service finishing school for them in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar commanded the headteacher to exact a strict admissions policy. The students were to be the children of foreign royalty or nobility. They were to be fit, healthy and handsome. They were to have razor-sharp minds. There were to be no commoners or struggling students in the class of 605 BC. Most of all, the students were to be young enough to be brainwashed easily. A three-year immersion in the language, literature and culture of Babylon had to be enough to turn them into loyalists who remembered nothing of their former homes, their former culture or their former values. They were to become automatons of the Babylonian Empire. Nebuchadnezzar dreamed of world domination and this finishing school was how it would all begin.

First, the students were given a crash course in the everyday language of Babylon. Chaldean Aramaic used the same alphabet as Hebrew and shared much of its vocabulary, which made things a little easier for Daniel and the other Jewish

students.¹ Then came lessons in literature, which meant reading texts in Sumerian and Akkadian too, the ancient languages of Babylon. For three years, Daniel and the other Jewish students were forced to dedicate their minds to pagan myths and culture, so that they would forget the story of the people of the God of Israel.²

The Devil tempts people from the outside in. He targets our eyes to incite fleshly desire, which will result in sinful action that damages our souls. King Nebuchadnezzar therefore supplied the school canteen with the best food and wine from his royal table. The meat had not been butchered in accordance with the strict regulations in the Law of Moses. It had been dedicated to the gods of Babylon, along with the wine, but what was that to hungry students? It looked tasty, and three years of allowing their eyes to rule over their bodies ought to be enough to make the students loyal citizens of Babylon.³

Last of all, King Nebuchadnezzar commanded his officials to rename all of the students at his finishing school. People tend to live up to what the most important people in their lives speak over them, so the Jewish students were to be given names which supplanted any memory of the God of Israel with a pledge to serve the gods of Babylon.

Daniel means *The-Lord-Is-My-Judge* or *The-Lord-Will-Vindicate-Me*, so the headteacher renamed him Belteshazzar, which means *Bel-Will-Protect-The-King*. Something similar happened to his three close school friends. Hananiah means *The-Lord-Has-Shown-Me-Grace*, so he was renamed Shadrach which means *Commanded-By-The-Moon-God-Aku*. Mishael means *Who-Is-Like-God?*, so he became Meshach which means *Who-Is-Like-Aku?* Azariah means *The-Lord-Is-My-Helper*, so he

¹ *Chaldeans* is the true ancient name for the Babylonians – for example, in the Hebrew text of Daniel 1:4.

² Daniel focuses on the Jewish students at the school, but Nebuchadnezzar must also have conscripted students from amongst his other prisoners of war: from Egypt, Assyria, Phoenicia and elsewhere.

³ Leviticus 17:10–14; Deuteronomy 12:15–16; 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 and 10:18–33. Note the order when Revelation 18:13 teaches us literally that the goal of Babylon is to enslave “the bodies and souls of people”.

became Abednego which means *Servant-of-Nebo*. Every trace of Jewishness was erased from their names.

This was a vital moment in Jewish history. Although they didn't know it at the time, this initial group of exiles in Babylon was deciding what cultural values would shape the Jewish community during its exile and after its return to the Promised Land. Within two decades, the nation of Judah would be wiped off the map, leaving its future in the hands of the Jewish exiles in Babylon.⁴ If they succumbed to Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to brainwash them and to paganize their culture, then the history of Israel was over. But it was here in the schoolrooms of Babylon that a great Jewish spiritual revival began.

Daniel dared to be different. He shifted his eyes away from the odds that were stacked against him. Looking up to heaven, he concluded that one believer plus the God of Israel was a winning team.⁵ He decided to resist the king of Babylon and, amazingly, he won. For Christians, who are called to live at the heart of modern-day Babylon, this raises an important question. What was the secret of Daniel's revival? How did it all begin?

We have already noted that the Devil tempts people from the outside in. He targets their eyes to entice their bodies, so that their flesh attempts to dominate their inner being, instead of being governed by it.⁶ This is the spiritual battle highlighted in Proverbs 4:23 – *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"* – and which the Exodus generation of Israelites lost, forfeiting the Promised Land because *"their hearts were devoted to their idols."*⁷ Whenever we feast our eyes

⁴ Jeremiah 24 and Ezekiel 11 warn the Jews left behind in Jerusalem not to consider themselves the "lucky ones". God would rebuild their nation, not through them, but through the Jewish exiles in Babylon.

⁵ The fact that Daniel's dreams had just been shattered through his exile to Babylon makes his refusal to doubt the Lord's goodness all the more remarkable here.

⁶ For example, in Genesis 3:6 and 6:2; Joshua 7:21; 2 Samuel 11:2–4; Psalm 119:37; Matthew 5:28 and 6:22–23; James 1:14–15 and 1 John 2:16.

⁷ Ezekiel 20:16. Character is formed by little heart decisions. If we are ever going to stand our ground over big issues in the future, then we need to stand our ground over small issues now. Daniel and his friends were laying a foundation for their lives, and in doing so they laid a new foundation for their nation.

on things that entice our flesh to dominate our spirit, we end up losing our battle against temptation.

Daniel therefore decided not to fix his eyes on the meat and wine in the school canteen. He refused to let his study of Babylonian culture make him forget what it meant for him to have been born into the Jewish nation. He resolved not to let the new name that his pagan schoolteachers had given him dilute what he believed about his identity in God. We are told literally in verse 8 that *"Daniel set his heart not to defile himself with the royal food and wine"*. That's how it all begins when it comes to spiritual revival. Holiness flows from the inside out.⁸ One of the greatest Jewish revivals in history began when Daniel resolved deep within his heart that he would live as God's man in Babylon.⁹

These words were written down for us. They explain how the Jewish nation was granted a second Exodus from Babylon. They also teach us how we can work for a great revival of the Church in our own generation. It all begins with a resolution in our hearts that we will serve the Lord and the Lord alone. The great nineteenth-century preacher and revivalist Charles Spurgeon explains it this way:

*The Christian is no more a common man. . . If you and I are tempted to sin, we must reply, "No, let another man do that, but I cannot. I am God's man; I am set apart for him; how shall I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" Let dedication enforce sanctification.*¹⁰

⁸ The New Testament explains this further. When God's Spirit unites himself with our spirit (1 Corinthians 6:17), his holiness flows out from deep within us – from *spirit* to *soul* and to *body* (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

⁹ Similar resolutions of the heart are commended to us in Job 31:1; Psalm 17:3; Luke 21:14 and Acts 11:23.

¹⁰ From a sermon entitled "Threefold Sanctification", preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London on 9 February 1862. The reference is to a similar heart resolution made by Joseph in Genesis 39:9.