MISSION IN THE WAY OF DANIEL

Empowering Believers to Live into God's Plan

Edward L. Smither

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CHAPTER 1

Vulnerable: Displaced for God's Mission

In the opening of his book, Daniel wastes no time recounting how his homeland was conquered by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and how he and three friends were taken into captivity and exiled to Babylon.

> *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.*
>
> *Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from*

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> *the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.*
>
> *Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. …*
>
> *And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Dan 1:1–7, 21)*

In the first of three deportations of the Israelites,[1] the Babylonians took members of the royal family and the nobility. An intentional move, the Babylonians wanted to cripple any Israelite leadership by creating dependency on the Babylonian court. By exiling Daniel and other noble youth, they were also weakening the prospects of future leadership in Judah.[2]

Daniel and his friends were taken when they were only teenagers. Daniel would ultimately spend seventy years of his life in exile. Though he would have witnessed the first Jewish exiles' return to Jerusalem under the Persian King Cyrus, Daniel probably never saw his homeland again.[3]

In addition to removing the young men from their homeland, the Babylonians changed their names. This not only robbed them of their personal and cultural identities, but since their names had religious significance, it was also an attempt to diminish their Jewish faith. The Hebrew name Daniel means "God is my judge"; Hananiah means "The LORD shows grace"; Mishael means "Who is what God is?"; and Azariah means "The LORD helps." Their new names—Belteshazzar (Daniel's new name), Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—also had religious meanings—only now, they paid homage to the Babylonian deities.[4]

Though Daniel and his friends would find favor and be promoted in Babylon and Persia and spend the remainder of their days there, they would still be regarded as foreigners. Throughout the narrative, the Babylonians and Persians identify them as "exiles from Judah" (Dan 2:25;

1 These occurred in 605, 597, and 586 BC. During the third wave, Jerusalem completely fell to the Babylonians.

2 See further Goldingay, *Daniel*, 15; Longman, *Daniel*, 47; and Duguid and Wegner, "Daniel: Introduction and Notes," 1586.

3 See further Archer and Youngblood, "Daniel: Introduction and Notes," 1464; also Longman, *Daniel*, 18.

4 See further Longman, *Daniel*, 51; and Goldingay, *Daniel*, 24.

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5:13; 6:13). While Daniel and his friends come to understand the language, culture, literature, and political workings of their host people, they never fully assimilate because of their faith in the God of Israel. When certain Babylonian court officials denounce Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to Nebuchadnezzar, they refer to them as "some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon … who pay no attention to you. … They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan 3:12).

Migration in Scripture

Daniel's story of displacement is not unusual. The Bible contains many accounts of migration and peoples on the move. Christopher Wright argues that "Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative. People on the move are so much a part of the fabric of the story we hardly notice it as a major feature."[5]

In sketching out a theology of migration, Andrew Walls classifies two types of migration in Scripture—Adamic and Abrahamic.[6] Describing the first, Walls writes:

> *In the story of Adam and Eve we meet involuntary migration, migration that stands for loss: loss of home, loss of well-being, loss of expectations; migration that represents a transition from a desirable to a far less desirable way of life.*[7]

Because of their ingratitude and disobedience, the first couple is forcibly removed from the garden (Gen 3:4–19). So Adamic migration is "punitive" and "the result of wrongdoing."[8] In Genesis, this migration continues after Cain murders his brother (Gen 4:13–16) and is "condemned to a wandering life of continual migration, away from the kinship group whose bonds he has violated."[9]

We observe it again when the gathered nations construct the Tower of Babel, a symbol of their pride and refusal to obey the cultural mandate to "be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). God destroys the tower, confuses their languages, and disperses

5 Wright, "Shared Human Condition," 144.

6 Walls, "Toward a Theology of Migration," 51–57.

7 Walls, 52.

8 Walls, 53.

9 Walls, 52–53.

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the peoples (Gen 11:1–9).[10] Ironically, God, in judgment, pushes the nations out to *fulfill* the cultural mandate.

Contrasting Adam's plight and Abraham's migration, Walls writes, "Abraham leaves in hope, with the expectation of a better life. … The stimulus to leave … is the divine call, the initiative of God. … Abraham's migration has a missionary aspect."[11] This hopeful pilgrimage can also be observed in the lives of Isaac and Jacob (Gen 26:2–5; 32:22–32). For Walls, Abrahamic migration continues with the Exodus, when God delivers his people from slavery in Egypt and leads them to a place of flourishing in the Promised Land.[12] It is also the basis for the missionary movements of the Apostle Paul and the early church, making disciples of all peoples and taking the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Though Abrahamic migrants are virtuous people who sojourn in hope, they are not spared hardship along the way.

Though Abrahamic migrants are virtuous people who sojourn in hope, they are not spared hardship along the way. Their initial migration could be provoked by the evil actions of others. Though Joseph's presence in Egypt brought blessing to the family of Jacob and was the seed for the Exodus centuries later, Joseph initially moves to Egypt involuntarily because of the jealous and violent actions of his brothers (Gen 37:18–36). Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus seek refuge in Egypt before returning to Nazareth because of Herod's murderous campaign against baby boys (Matt 2:13–18).

Finally, while the early church is called to be Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), the latter part of the call is fulfilled in part because "a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1).

As I read Wall's categories of biblical migration, I think there might also be a third category: Abrahamic migration *within* Adamic migration. That is, within a group that is exiled for their sin and disobedience, there

10 See further Walls, 53.

11 Walls, 53–54.

12 See further Walls, 54–55.

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are righteous people—a remnant—who serve the Lord in a redemptive manner. This is how I see the story of Daniel and his friends.

Within a group that is exiled for their sin and disobedience, there are righteous people—a remnant—who serve the Lord in a redemptive manner. This is how I see the story of Daniel and his friends.

After a long history of disobedience, Israel was conquered and exiled, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. While tragic, this came as no surprise, since God had repeatedly reminded his chosen ones that failing to keep the covenant would result in judgment. In Deuteronomy 4:27, God promises: "The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you."[13] Though Nebuchadnezzar conquers Judah and plunders the temple (his attempt to show his greatness and the greatness of his gods over the God of Israel), Daniel is clear that "*the Lord* delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchanezzar's] hand" (Dan 1:2; emphasis mine).[14] Longman notes that Daniel calls God "the Lord" (*Adonai*), which refers to his "ownership" and "control" of the situation. In allowing the temple to be plundered and Jerusalem to fall, God makes good on his covenant promises and shows his sovereignty.[15]

Daniel and his friends suffered the hardships of displacement through no apparent fault of their own. In this sense, John Goldingay argues for a parallel connection between Daniel's experience and Joseph's involuntary migration to Egypt, which came at the hands of his wicked brothers.[16] Though Daniel certainly felt the injustice against himself, he also identifies with sinful Israel and Judah in a corporate prayer of repentance:

13 See also Lev 26:14–46 and Deut 28:64.

14 See further Goldingay, *Daniel*, 15, 21; see also Dan 9:11–14.

15 See further Longman, *Daniel*, 46; also Duguid and Wegner, "Daniel: Introduction and Notes," 1586; and Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty*, 14–15.

16 See further Goldingay, *Daniel*, 16.

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