

October 23, 2022

The Bible Story Journey: Diaspora

Jeremiah 24:1-7; Daniel 1-6

When Nebuchadnezzar took the first group of captives from Jerusalem into exile, the prophet Jeremiah stayed behind. The people were divided. Then God spoke to the prophet. We read Jeremiah 24, verses 1-10:

24 The Lord showed me two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. This was after King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the artisans, and the smiths, and had brought them to Babylon. ²One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. ³And the Lord said to me, 'What do you see, Jeremiah?' I said, 'Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.'

⁴Then the word of the Lord came to me: ⁵Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. ⁶I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. ⁷I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.'

Jerusalem had been captured. The king, and most of the nobles of Jerusalem, had been dragged off to captivity, perhaps never to be seen again. In that time of grief, God told Jeremiah that those captives in Babylon were the future. "Those are the good figs," God said. "From them, I will plant something new." And from that moment, the people of Israel, the Jews, were divided into two groups: those in Judea and those dispersed among the nations. Even after the exile ended and Jews were permitted to return to their homeland, these two groups remained. There were the Judean Jews, and there were the Diaspora Jews – the scattered ones. Over the past few weeks, I've been telling the stories of the Jews who returned to rebuild the Promised Land. But what about the others? What about the ones who stayed in the Persian Empire, making their lives there? We don't have much, but a few stories illustrate the challenges that the Diaspora Jews had living as a minority faith in a powerful empire. Let's hear a few of those.

In the days of the first exile, when Nebuchadnezzar had taken all the nobles of Jerusalem to his capital, he decided he should get some use out of them. He sent his steward, Ashpenaz, to look through the prisoners for any likely young men that could be brought to the castle and trained as wise men. "Look for bright, good-looking ones," he said. "Nothing wrong with having good-looking men around."

Ashpenaz did as directed, and chose from the exiles four promising young men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were immediately given Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. For some reason, though, Daniel's Babylonian name never stuck. He was always just Daniel. Anyway, they were brought in with others and enrolled in official Babylonian wise man school. They had to know the stars, learn to read and write Aramaic, study law, and so on, but there were advantages. Their meals came from the royal kitchens, the best food in the land. Plus there was all the wine you could drink.

But, as you may recall, Jews have some dietary restrictions. Daniel went to Ashpenaz. “Sir, my friends and I would rather not eat this food.”

“What?”

“Do you think we could just have fresh vegetables and water?”

“You’ll starve! I can’t let you do that. When the king sees that you’re just skin and bones, I’m the one he’ll have whipped!”

“Try us for ten days,” Daniel said. “See how we look then.”

Well, as it happened, after ten days, everyone else looked bloated and hungover, but Daniel and his friends looked great. They got to keep their diet.

Some time later, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream. It’s an interesting dream, but we don’t have all day, so you’ll have to read the details yourself in Daniel 2. What’s important for the story is that he sent for his wise men to interpret the dream for him. Now, Daniel and his friends were officially wise men, but at this point they were like apprentices and didn’t get the initial call. The king explained, “I had a terrible dream last night, and I need you to interpret it.”

“No problem, O king. Just tell us the dream.”

“Ah, but how do I know you won’t just make something up?” he demanded. Since that was precisely what they had been planning to do, what they always did, they had no reply. “Tell you what: first you tell me what my dream was, and if you get *that* right, then I’ll know that I can trust your interpretation.”

“That’s a good one, O king. But seriously, just tell us the dream.”

“I am serious. And if you can’t tell me the dream, I’ll have all your heads.”

“What? No, sire! No wise man could do that! That’s impossible!”

So Nebuchadnezzar issued a decree that all his wise men should be executed at once. *All* of them. Even the interns. When Daniel and his friends were escorted to the executioner, Daniel asked, “Is one permitted to ask why we are being beheaded?”

The executioner, named Arioch, was not a huge fan of wise men in general so that day he loved his job, but like many of the palace servants he had a soft spot for the veggie crew, who were always polite and never stuck up. He explained the execution order.

“So if I can tell the king his dream, he’ll withdraw the order?” asked Daniel.

“Can you do that?”

“I can’t. But I worship a God who can. How much time can you buy us?”

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego went inside to pray, while Arioch asked the king for a short delay. At the end of that time, Daniel appeared before the king, told him what he had dreamed, (“That’s right! Hey, this kid got it right!”), and then what it meant. The king reversed the execution order, and Daniel himself got a promotion. Soon he became the king’s most trusted counselor.

In that capacity, Daniel must have been sent off to the provinces sometimes, because the next story has no Daniel, only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. For whatever reason – power-drunk is the best guess – King Nebuchadnezzar had a huge golden statue set up and

decided that it would be the new god of Babylon, and everyone should worship it. So, because he could, he ordered that every time his personal musicians played a tune, everyone was to stop what they were doing and bow down to his idol. Anyone who didn't was to be thrown into a fiery furnace. Then, I imagine, the king had fun, giving his musicians a cue and watching everyone grovel.

Now not everyone loved the veggie crew. In fact, the other wise men frankly hated that four, probably because they kept being smarter than the rest, and in Nebuchadnezzar's new decree, they saw a way to get rid of them. "O king," they said. "We just stopped by to tell you how much we loved your new golden image. It's *so* clever of you to have us worship it at the sound of music. If only everyone did."

"What?"

"Didn't you know? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego don't."

The king was furious. He sent for the young men at once. "What's this I hear about you not worshiping my image? How dare you! You have one chance. I'm going to send for my musicians right now, and when they start playing, you'd better start praying!"

The three replied, "Don't trouble your musicians, sire. The answer is no. No, we won't bow down before your image or any idol at all. We only worship our God."

The king's eyes bugged out with astonishment. "And do you think your God can save you from my fiery furnace?" he gabbled.

"We know that our God *can*," they replied. "But even if he doesn't, we're not bowing down to your idol."

Nebuchadnezzar turned purple. He had the fire heated extra hot and the three young men thrown in. The fire was so hot that the soldiers who took them to the opening died from the flames. Nebuchadnezzar gave them some time to cook, then had the lid removed so he could look down at the ashes of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. What he saw instead was four men strolling around, chatting amiably to each other.

"Four?" Nebuchadnezzar whispered. The fourth one looked brighter than the fire. "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego!" the king called out. "You can come out now! Just kidding!"

The three men – just three now – emerged from the flames, and they didn't even smell of smoke. "No offense?"

Years passed. Nebuchadnezzar died, and for a time Daniel and his friends were out of favor in the court, but eventually a new king came to the throne, named Darius, who recognized Daniel's gifts and restored him to his old position. But it was the same old story. All the other counselors were jealous of Daniel and tried to find something they could charge him with so as to get rid of him. But the man was squeaky clean. His only peculiarity was that every afternoon he went to his rooms, opened the windows, and prayed with his face toward Jerusalem. "We can do something with that," they said.

"O king Darius," they said. "Really, we've been thinking, that you're more than a king. You're like a god yourself. You know what we think? You should make a rule that for the next month people should pray only to you, and anyone who prays to any other god should be thrown into a den of lions!"

The kings in these stories are not notable for their intelligence. King Darius signed the decree, which his counselors had already drawn up and had handy, and sure enough, the next day they were back. “O my king, didn’t you sign a decree that everyone should pray only to you?”

“Well, you know I did. You brought it to – ”

“Oh, king, it gives us great pain to tell you that Daniel is praying to another god! Nothing you can do about it! A royal decree cannot be revoked!”

That apparently was true. It seems odd – that’s not how absolute monarchy normally works – but Darius, at least, accepted that he had no choice but to reluctantly throw Daniel into a den full of ravenous lions. “Maybe the God that you pray to will protect you?” he said hopelessly.

Darius couldn’t sleep all night, and the next morning he raced out to call down into the lion’s den. “Daniel? Did your God save you? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, your highness. An angel closed the lions’ mouths. Can I come out now?”

Darius called over his shoulder. “Bring me a rope! Let’s get this man out of there! Oh, and bring me my wise men, too. My poor lions haven’t eaten all night!”

And Daniel, we read, remained an honored counselor in the royal court right up to the reign of King Cyrus the Persian.

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I like the stories of Daniel, but there’s a lot that doesn’t add up in them: details that don’t fit what we know of the history of that time or that just make sense no at all. It’s probably best not to strain ourselves with those details. What is fascinating to me is the world that is implied by these stories, the world of the Diaspora Jews who told them. It is a world where you keep your faith to oneself as much as possible, but without compromising its demands. It’s a world of quietly opting for raw vegetables and water because that’s the only thing you can be sure is kosher. It’s a world of daily prayer and weekly Sabbath observance, all done privately. But it’s also a world where you may be faced with a choice: bow to another god, for instance, or die. If that should happen, our stories teach, do not deny your faith. Trust in God’s protection.

Final word: In our scripture today, God told Jeremiah that the exiles were the good figs, the ones who would restore the true faith. That seems to have been saying that the exiles were the ones who would rebuild Jerusalem, and that was in fact what happened. But there’s a deeper meaning to that promise. Those exiled Jews who figured out a way to quietly observe their faith among the Gentiles, living in a hostile world, would be the salvation of Israel. For most of the next two and a half millennia, there would be no Jewish homeland. The only Judaism that survived would be the quiet faith held stubbornly despite persecution by Persians, by Greeks, by Romans, and by Christians. That stubborn faith has bent; it has never broken, and in these stories today we caught a glimpsed something of why.