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Old Testament battles and love stories. As a child I wanted to be like those heroes. I imagined being a David defeating Goliath, and a Gideon rescuing Israel with cunning. But is that how we are to understand the Old Testament? As we see the flawed heroes of the past, what is God's message for us? Let's look at Daniel chapter 1 for help us think this through.

*In the 3rd year of Jehoiakim's reign over 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 God's temple. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.*

It sounds like any another war. Yet it was much more. It was a crisis of faith. 400 years earlier, God entered Solomon's Temple and God protected it. No one had defeated Jerusalem since. They were the unbeatable! Everyone was repelled! Until Jehoiakim... Jerusalem was invaded. Had God been beaten by a stronger god? When kings fought, they believed their gods fought. Babylon's god must be more powerful. God had been defeated!

Yet there was some hope, for the city and temple still stood, and they had a Jewish king, although he was a Babylonian puppet. But all the good leaders and royalty, the cream of the crop, were taken to Babylon, where:- *The king ordered Ashpenaz, his chief official, to bring in some Israelite princes and nobility -- young men, not disabled, handsome, intelligent, 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 amt of food and wine from his table. And after 3 years of training they were to enter the king's service.*

Jerusalem's leaders were drafted into the Babylonian king's service.

Imagine a rival firm take over the company you work for. A new broom sweeps clean. They begin sweeping. That take over is no longer just a financial page report. It affects lives and comfort. Loyalty to the new boss can be v difficult, especially after a painful takeover. Imagine the young men. Defeated in battle... Made to walk in chains an equivalent from here to Queensland. Made to learn the victor's language and customs, eat their food and serve their king.

But that is not all. *Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.*

*The chief official gave them new names: Belteshazzar; Shadrach; Meshach; and Abednego.*

Our names are very personal. We can change them if we want, but imagine the government changing your name without permission. It's like being known only by a number. But there is more: all 4 original names included something about God, but the new names all include the name of the Babylonian god.

It is worse than having your name changed from Kevin Rudd to John Howard.

The loss of their original identity was almost complete. Total assimilation, no multi-culturalism. All to be Babylonians.

But there were benefits. They could eat the same food and wine as the king. They could live in the palace and be trained... but their attitudes would grind with the comfort around them.

Daniel resolved not to defile himself with royal food and wine. He asked the official if he and the other 3 could eat vegetables and water. The official liked him, but was scared the king would have his head if they looked worse than the others, so he refused.

Daniel then approached his personal guard, and after a 10 day trial on vegetables and water, the 4 looked much healthier than any on Babylonian cuisine. So they were allowed to eat the different food and not defile themselves.

v17 says *To these 4 young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.* When the 3 year period was up, Daniel and friends were found to be the most handsome and wise of all the trainees, and were given very important jobs in the kingdom.

v21 gives the postscript *Daniel remained there until the 1st year of King Cyrus.* He outlasted the kings of Babylon; For Cyrus was the Persian king who defeated Babylon and sent the Jews home.

At this point some interpret the story as:- When you feel everything has gone against everything you believe, at work or wherever... what will you do? How will you react? Don't cave in! Don't fight against it! Be a Daniel, and stand firm in peaceful resistance!

That's a common but faulty interpretation. It does not consider Jesus Christ. It makes this a story with a moral. But this was written to give us more than just a nice moral of chin up, hang in there and be a Ghandi, sorry, a Daniel.

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Others say: When you feel God is defeated, if you persevere even through the harsh and apparently God-forsaken times, God will reward you. Be a Daniel! Resist evil! Hang in there for God!

This has moved from merely a moral story. Now it includes God, and it seems to fit those passages in the Bible which encourage us to persevere to receive the crown.

The problem is where does Jesus fit in? Saying hang in there for Jesus also puts the emphasis on we have got to be the saviour for Jesus. The problem is really one of who do we identify with in the Old Testament? Should we identify with the heroes, or should we identify with the people of Israel, the ones who constantly cry out to God in deep pain and agony after they turned from him and needed saving.

God raised up Daniel as the saviour-like figure in the 70 years of exile in Babylon. God raised him to protect the Israelites from total destruction. The major theme of the book is:- God works behind the scenes even in hostile times, to save and keep His people. He did this work through Daniel and the other 3 men. This chapter shows how 4 Jews rose to prominence in a pagan king's court.

God let his people be punished because they had left him and gone after other gods. God brought Babylon to Jerusalem. It was no mere chance of fate. God was actively working through their evil intentions to bring about His good purposes. v2 says *The Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.*

When all was futile in Babylon, v9 says *God had caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel.*

God gave knowledge, wisdom and the ability to interpret dreams. He prepared Daniel and the 3 for the task ahead. And through them, God's people were saved.

So we should identify with the Israelites who went into exile. Daniel was their saviour-like figure chosen by God to save them. Jesus is our saviour.

In our troubles, when God seems far away and defeated by modern technology, we are to persevere, not because we are a Daniel, but because we know that God has already won, defeating evil. We live in the mop up stage of that war. He works behind the scenes. Because Jesus persevered even through to His death on the cross, His rewards are ours. So persevere in faith, because He has been there and done it for us, and wants to give us

wisdom to see through the false values of this world, to see His love and care always with us.