

Daniel and the King's Meat

*Food, glorious food,
Hot sausage and mustard,
When you're in the mood,
Cold jelly and custard*

So begins a popular song from Lionel Bart's popular musical, "Oliver."

I enjoy my food, don't you? Most people do. However, sometimes many of us suffer from health problems stemming from the lack of purity in our food. Some types of *hot sausage* and *cold jelly* are just two examples; but let's not just pick on them! The problem of impure food is not a new one. Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (better known by their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) faced the problem of defiled food approximately 2,600 years ago, when they were captives in Babylon:

And the king spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes; children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king. Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of 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. Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? Then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king. Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse. As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm. (Daniel 1:3-20 KJV)

The purpose of this article is to examine and explain this account of Daniel and his three friends and their attitude toward the king's food and to glean some lessons from it for God's people today.

Nebuchadnezzar's Vain Desire

The first thing we should notice here is that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had a vain desire to change the captive nobility and royalty of Judah. Daniel and his three friends were members of the Jewish royal family. (It is interesting to consider that these four youths may have been ancestors of Queen Elizabeth II). The king had a proud wish to change them from their Israelite ways and – more importantly – from God's ways, to his own pagan, Babylonian ways. He wanted to change their names, their language, their education and even their eating habits. I had thought, in past readings of this account, that King Nebuchadnezzar was just being good to these Jewish lads because they were his "fellow royals," but this is not so. When the Babylonians conquered a nation, they would march the people off to Babylon and put their own and other foreign people in the captured land. They would subdue the captured nation by virtually brainwashing its royalty and nobility so that they and their people would become totally overcome, shamed, and would lose their national identity.

Is not Satan trying to do the same to God's people today? We have been called out of the Babylon of his world – the world that is held captive by the present prince and ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Ephesians 2:2). Since our conversion, our language, education and, yes, even our eating habits should now be according to the standards God has taught us. He has even promised us a new name (Isaiah 62:2; Revelation 2:17; 3:12). But Satan wants to recapture us. Like those four Jewish youths in Babylon, we have no choice but to live in Satan's world; but we do not have to speak Satan's filthy language, we can sift the good from the bad in his educational systems, and we certainly do not have to eat his food. God has taught us His dietary laws (see Leviticus 11) and has nowhere revoked them.

Daniel a Vegetarian?

The second point to note in this account in the first chapter of the book of Daniel is that it does not, as some have taught, command or even suggest mandatory vegetarianism.

Why then did Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the king's "meat" and arrange to eat "pulse" (KJV: An old term for highly nutritious, legume-type vegetables such as lentils, peas and beans; also a porridge made from any of these)? Did they make these arrangements because it was "meat" that was being offered them? There are two probable answers to this question:

First, some of the food offered to them may have been unclean (per Leviticus 11) and, as it was the king's food, some of it may have been consecrated in pagan religious rites (Exodus 34:15).

Secondly, newer versions of the Bible translate the Chaldean words *pathbag* and *makal* as "food", "rich food" or "delicacies" and not "meat" as the King James Version translates them. The Babylonian royal food – which probably did include meat – and the wine were likely heavily laden with spices, preservatives and additives... perhaps ancient Babylon's versions of MSG, nitrites and sulphites! Hence, the young Jewish noblemen had sound health reasons to avoid Nebuchadnezzar's menu. We can be certain that Daniel was not a vegetarian because of the words he recorded for us in the tenth chapter of his book:

In those days I Daniel was mourning three full weeks. I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled. (Daniel 10:2-3)

Daniel tells us here that he did not eat "flesh" (meat) or drink wine until after his three week fast was over. The word here translated as "flesh" is *basar*, which definitely refers to animal meat. Things had changed in Babylon by the time referred to in this tenth chapter of the book of Daniel. Cyrus of Persia was now king, and the Persians had different ideas regarding captivity and conquest. Conditions appeared to be generally easier for the Jews. Daniel evidently now had access to clean meat, wine and "pleasant bread" (desserts, etc.) that were more pure than the Babylonian royal fare, and was able to enjoy them without fear or guilt.

What can we learn from this?

The third and final point is to ask ourselves what we can learn from this account. Of course, we can derive many things from even a short passage such as this one when we delve in and deeply research these things. It is unlikely that a mere ten days of eating vegetables would have had a marked effect on the physical appearance of the four lads. It is more likely that, because of their faith in God and their obedience to His food laws, He intervened to make the difference. The main, outstanding example is for God's people of all eras to be very careful about what we eat and drink. Herbert Armstrong encouraged such carefulness as one of the "seven laws of radiant health." We should be striving to eat foods which are as pure, as fresh, and as natural as possible. This is not to say they always have to be raw salads and vegetables. A good guideline – again from the pen of Herbert Armstrong – is that we should eat foods that *can* spoil and, of course, we should eat them before they *do* spoil! Although mineral and vitamin supplements can help replace some of the essentials missing from today's food, they are not, by themselves, the keys to good nutrition and health. We should continue to be – or get back to being – avid label readers. When in doubt about the freshness or contents of a food item, or if you're in a foreign country and are not sure, take the example of Daniel and his three friends: eat vegetables and you will not go far wrong. (N.B. In some foreign countries, you may be wiser to choose cooked vegetables, as the water that salads and raw vegetables are washed in may be impure). We all need to exercise caution and restraint in our choices of what we eat. Although we should be balanced and not become food fanatics, it is important for us to spend the necessary time and energy to ensure that we and our families maintain a proper diet.

God's people would do well to follow this fine example of Daniel and his three friends. With our food – as with all other aspects of our lives – we need to be doing it God's way.

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December 3, 2010