

Chapter 4:

LOVING DANIEL

Daniel 1:3–21

It was the beginning of the feast of Ishtar,¹ and Ashpenaz was in high spirits. This was his favorite time of year, when the promise of spring was almost fulfilled. He whistled a Chaldean love song as he entered the dining hall to check the tables. Usually he gave the chief steward wide latitude on what bowls he used and how, or if, he decorated the hall. But during the new year feast of Ishtar, Ashpenaz took control. Dice for casting fortunes were set at each place, along with coins, a decorated egg, and scattered grains. Every few cubits, he'd had bowls of dried wheat and barley, accented with blue flax flowers, placed in the center of the tables.

Whistling the refrain of his love song, Ashpenaz picked up a branch of the flowers and studied it. They were a marvel, cleverly made from dyed cloth. He put the branch in his hair, and then walked down the table stretching out his chief's staff to move a bowl here and straighten a goblet there until he came to the place where Daniel usually sat. There he stopped to pick up the dice and roll them — with mixed results. He turned the bad die until a lucky number appeared, then idly rearranged the coins and grain around the dice. He inhaled deeply, remembering the day he had chosen this young man with the golden eyes and the stick-straight posture.

¹ Some scholars believe the Jewish feast of Purim is based on an older Babylonian spring new year festival involving the goddess Ishtar, and perhaps Marduk. I have imagined a feast of Ishtar with some Purim-like elements, combined with symbols from the Zoroastrian new year. Julius Lewy, "The Feast of the 14th Day of Adar," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Carey A. Moore; New York: Ktav, 1982), 160–184. Helmer Ringgren, "Esther and Purim," in *Studies in the Book of Esther*, 185–204.

As chief eunuch, it was Ashpenaz's job to choose the new "recruits" from among the recent captives.² Normally he allowed the captain of the guard to cull the most likely prospects (nobility, poets, priests³), and then he would simply choose the most attractive and least ignorant from among those pre-selected. But sometimes Ashpenaz liked to go down to the city gate as the army marched in captives from foreign lands, to see if he couldn't find some diamonds among the common gravel.⁴ He liked the idea of snatching up a young man destined for an unimportant life, rebuilding some *tel* or serving in the army, and offering him the chance to live in the palace eating from the king's choice foods and drinking the king's fine wines.⁵

That morning, seven months ago, Ashpenaz had been standing in the shadow of the blue bricks of the gate of Ishtar⁶ next to a handsome foreign guard. Leaning on his chief's staff

² The biblical text says "Then the king commanded his [chief eunuch] Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites . . . to serve in the king's palace" (1:3–4 NRSV). However, it seems unlikely the king of Babylon would trouble himself with making a special order every time a new city was captured. Instead, I have interpreted the king's charge to Ashpenaz as a *standing order* to bring some of each ethnic group captured.

³ The biblical text tells us members of the royal family and nobility were specifically requested by the king (1:3). Likewise many commentators have pointed to the phrase "without physical defect" in verse 4 as an indication of a priestly context. We also know from outside records that artisans, nobility, and sometimes priests were the most likely candidates for service in foreign courts, where they often served as eunuchs. John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 136.

⁴ According to the biblical text, only the poorest people were left in Judah (2 Kings 24:14). Although we may think of the king of Babylon exporting the "cream of the crop" to serve him in his palace, there were also large numbers of "average" people deported simply to destabilize the local Judean society. J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 420–4.

⁵ Most of the captives exiled from Judah were settled in ruined cities called *tels* (i.e. "mounds"), which they were expected to rebuild. Probably the most famous of these is Tel-abib, the home of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 3:15). Some deportees were also conscripted into the Babylonian army and forced to serve in foreign campaigns. Jacob Neusner, "Babylonia," *EncJud* 4, 36; Bezalel Porten, "Babylonian Exile," *EncJud* 6, 1038.

⁶ The Ishtar gate, primary of the eight gates that led into the city of Babylon, was "magnificently decorated with blue enameled bricks into which were set red and white depictions of bulls and dragons." Chaim Potok, *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 1978).

watching the captives march by, Ashpenaz had also watched the guard out of the corner of his eye. What a shame he hadn't found that soldier earlier, when he still could have made a good eunuch. "Not much to look at here, is there?" Ashpenaz asked, pointing at the crowd.

The guard edged, "Depends on what you're looking for, I guess."

"Someone at least as handsome as you, dear. And that'll be hard to find." Ashpenaz smiled as the man coughed and blushed.

"If you say so," he mumbled.

And then Ashpenaz saw four young men in the crowd. They were walking close together, and the one in front had brilliant gold eyes and a perfect posture that showed no signs of having just been marched for weeks across the desert of Kedar.⁷ "By the gods, he looks like a legend," he breathed. And then to the guard said, "Get me those four, there."

The guard squinted and asked, "The women or the men?" He was as dumb as an ox — he made a good soldier after all.

"The men, dear. I don't think the king wants me training women to advise him in matters of state."

When Ashpenaz was able to see the four up close, he knew they were just what he was looking for — unblemished specimens of manly beauty whose carriage betrayed them as sons of wealth. As it turned out, the one with the flashing eyes and the stick-straight posture was named

⁷ The northern Arabian desert was home to the nomadic Kedarite tribes and the land they inhabited was sometimes referred to as Kedar. Mary Joan Winn Leith, "Israel Among the Nations: The Persian Period" in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 372, 383.

Daniel, just like the legendary Canaanite.⁸ And when Ashpenaz told them to follow him, Daniel had the audacity to ask, “Why? Where are we going?”

“On a more fabulous journey than you can ever imagine. Now follow me, before I have you shipped to the brickyards.”

The three stepped forward, but Daniel held his ground. “Where are you taking us?”

Ashpenaz turned and looked into the boy’s face, and for a moment simply watched those burning eyes. “I’m taking you to the palace of the king where you will eat his fine foods, walk in the famous gardens of Babylon, and rule as part of the king’s elite advisors. Or would you rather I send you to some ruined city where you can spend your days rebuilding houses and replanting vineyards?” He could hardly believe he was arguing with this boy. Normally he’d simply call a guard and have them taken forcefully, but something about Daniel made him want the boy’s consent. He put his hand up and waved it across the other three. “Daniel, I’ll let you make the decision for the four of you.”

The young man had actually pondered his decision for a moment, and Ashpenaz’s heart had beat faster. Then Daniel spoke, “I think we’ll take the palace job. I’ve had enough of this hot Babylonian sun.”

That was seven months ago, and in the intervening time Ashpenaz had grown fond of the boy with the deep eyes. Smiling at the memory, he reached in his pouch and dropped a few extra

⁸ The name Daniel, meaning “God is my judge,” may have been taken from a popular Canaanite legend. It also occurs three times in Ezekiel: twice in connection with the legendary men Noah and Job (Ezek 14:14, 20), and once in comparison with the king of Tyre who is said to have “the mind of a god” (Ezek 28:3). Collins, 140; André Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (trans. David Pellauer; Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 3.

coins around Daniel's bowl. Then he heard the rustling of the stewards as they entered the hall with large bowls of choice food from the king's table. As the steward for Daniel's table approached Ashpenaz snapped his fingers at him. "Come here, dear. See this place?" He pointed at Daniel's bowl.

"That's where Belteshazzar sits, my lord." Ashpenaz had given Daniel the Chaldean name Belteshazzar (meaning "preserve his life") as a guard against misfortune before the gelding, but the name hadn't stuck with most people — the legendary "Daniel" always seemed more appropriate.

"Yes, that's the one. Make sure he gets the best portion. We want him to start the year lucky."

The steward stood up straighter, "My lord, I always give him the best portion, just as you commanded."

Ashpenaz smiled, "Good, dear, I knew I could count on you."

"Thank you, my lord. Am I free to return to my work?"

"Yes, of course. Finish up before the boys come in." The steward turned and began scooping portions of meat into the bowls. Ashpenaz stepped away, and pretended to arrange the coins at another place. But out of the corner of his eye he watched to see that Daniel received the fattiest portion of meat. When he knew Daniel was taken care of, he turned away whistling. Tucking his staff under his arm, he folded his hands across his belly. Soon Daniel would begin to resemble his fat palace master, and maybe someday he could even take Ashpenaz's place. What fun, having a protégé.

As he walked toward the front of the room, to the table prepared for him and the instructors, Ashpenaz imagined the day he would pass the chief's staff to Daniel. He could guess how Daniel would respond. He could almost see the smirk in his eyes as he'd say, "Why would I want that?"

Ashpenaz would smile back, "Because it's yours, dear. You're my heir."

The bell, marking the end of afternoon classes, jolted Ashpenaz back to the dining hall. He'd arrived at his place, so he lay the staff down next to his bowl and lowered himself into his chair with a groan. He took one last look at the well-decorated hall — it was going to be a splendid new year.

At the far door, a very young-looking eunuch walked in, followed by a group of third-years — beautiful men who would soon graduate to the king's service. Ashpenaz could be proud of the work he'd done raising them. And behind them entered Daniel, still trailing the three Hebrews, still standing straighter than anyone else. The sight of him made Ashpenaz's kidneys jump.⁹

Daniel turned and spoke to his companions, and then walked directly toward the head table and Ashpenaz, waving and smiling. Ashpenaz sat up in his chair and waved back, "Daniel, dear," he called, "I pray all is well with you."

Daniel drew closer. "Yes, my lord."

"Classes are going well? The writing master tells me you have a steady hand."

"Yes, my lord."

"And I hear you already recite law better than any third-year."

⁹ In biblical texts, the heart is the seat of reason (much like the modern "mind"); passion, compassion, and other emotions come from lower in the body — from the womb, bowels, or kidneys. *BDB*, 523; Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1978), 33.

That brought a flash to his eyes. “It’s only memorizing. Anyone could do it if they put their heart to it.”

“That’s right. But no one has a heart like yours.” Ashpenaz could tell by the tightness in the boy’s jaw that he had something more important he wanted to talk about, so he opened the way for him. “But you didn’t come up here to give me a report on your memorizing. What can I do for you dear?”

Daniel moved around the table and knelt next to Ashpenaz, grabbing his hand. “I have a favor to ask of you.”

Ashpenaz inhaled. He could smell the oil in Daniel’s hair, and see the individual lashes around his eyes. “Dear, you don’t need to kneel before me to ask a favor. I love you like my own son. What is it?”

Daniel held his hand tighter. “I know that you love all of us, and want only what’s best for our well-being. So, I’m sure you’ll allow us this favor.” He reached up and placed his other hand on Ashpenaz’s, as well. “I and the other Hebrews have resolved not to defile ourselves with the king’s choice foods and fine wines.”

Ashpenaz felt his face grow hot. He pulled his hand away from Daniel’s and reached for his staff. The chief steward arrived at the table and poured Ashpenaz’s glass, before moving on to the other teachers. Ashpenaz took a sip of the wine. It tasted sweet, but his mouth was sour. What should he say? He thought to look at Daniel, but couldn’t. So, he looked around the room

instead. Every table was full with beautiful young men chatting and teasing each other. “Why now? You’ve been eating the food for months.”¹⁰

Daniel simply repeated himself, “We’ve resolved . . .”

Ashpenaz didn’t listen to the rest, his ears were too hot. The steward at Daniel’s table was pouring wine. The Hebrew boys watched Daniel. None of them were drinking. Ashpenaz cleared his throat. He couldn’t allow this little insurrection. He took another drink, and cleared his throat again. Then he turned to Daniel and smiled, “Dear boy, you know the king appoints the food you eat and the wine you drink. I love you, but I fear my lord the king.” He reached out and touched Daniel’s cheek. “If the king should see you gaunt and your pretty eyes dimmed, he would have my head.”

Daniel looked over at the table, where the Hebrews were still watching them. He took Ashpenaz’s hand from his cheek, then stood and spoke loud enough so they could hear, “Thank you, my lord. I must return to my friends with your word.” He turned and walked to his own table without another sound.

Ashpenaz followed him with his eyes. The boy might be more trouble than he was worth, but he had such a lovely gait — and those eyes. Ashpenaz held his fist to his lips; he could still smell the oil from Daniel’s hair.

As Ashpenaz watched, Daniel passed the table with his friends and walked to the steward in charge of them. Perhaps he’d already spoken to the steward, and now had to clear things up.

¹⁰ The biblical text gives no time markers besides the three-year period of training mentioned in verse 5, and the ten day trial in verse 12. I have allowed seven months to pass between the naming (1:7) and the resolution not to defile (1:8), in order to give Ashpenaz’s “favor and compassion” (1:9 NRSV) time to grow.

Ashpenaz reached for his goblet as Daniel spoke to the man. He took a sip, and the man looked up at him for assurance, so he shook his head, “No.” The man nodded, and walked with Daniel back to the table.

Then Ashpenaz choked on his wine, as he saw the Hebrews begin to pass their bowls toward the steward. The servant stacked several of them on top of each other and turned to walk out of the room. At the table, having finished passing their bowls, the Hebrews began passing their goblets and lining them up at the far end of the table. Daniel reached for the large bowl of grain in front of him, dropped his dice in it, and passed it down, as well.

Ashpenaz placed his hands on the table and lifted himself up. Standing, he grabbed his staff and pushed his chair back to give him more room. He walked around the end of his table, just in time to grab Daniel’s steward as he walked past with an armload of goblets. He held the man’s elbow and whispered, “What in the name of Ishtar are you doing?”

The steward looked at him and his eyebrows furled. “Taking away their dishes.”

Ashpenaz pulled his elbow, sloshing the wine down the man’s front and growling, “Why?”

“You . . . you gave me the sign. I thought . . . it was what you wanted. He said we’re to test the Hebrews for ten days, to see how they fair on vegetables and water. You gave me the sign. I thought . . .”

Ashpenaz felt a chill up his spine, and he turned to see the entire room watching him. He looked over at Daniel, whose golden eyes stared back at him. Ashpenaz’s grip loosened on the steward’s elbow, and he smiled. “Of course, dear. Daniel and his friends want a test.” He grinned

over at Daniel — the cunning legend. “May Ishtar bless you in the coming year, my son,” he called.

“Thank you, my lord.” Daniel called back, “But I believe Yahweh will bless us richly enough.”

To the steward, Ashpenaz whispered, “Do as the little prince says. I don’t care if he starves to death.” More loudly, he said, “Didn’t I order singers for this feast? Where are they? I want music!” He began walking back toward his seat, leaning heavily on his staff with each step. He felt old. “Chief Steward, dear,” he called, “poor me some more of that fine wine. I’m feeling thirsty.”

The next morning, Ashpenaz didn’t get out of bed. His head throbbed, and his face felt weathered and cracked. He called his attendant and told him to turn away anyone who wanted to see him — “even the king, himself, though I doubt he cares to call on me.” He ordered the lad to leave the draperies closed, and refused anything but water and boiled barley to eat. The next day, he tried to get up, but decided the lack of good food had made him weak. So, he remained in his room again. His attendant tried to coax him out for the evening meal, but he waved him off. Ashpenaz had been studying his gray hairs in a hand mirror when the lad suggested it. “They don’t need me,” he muttered without looking up. “If I’ve done my job well, this place will run for days without me.” And it did.

He did not return to the dining hall until the tenth day of Daniel’s test. That day, he arrived early. And as he entered the room, he snapped his fingers at Daniel’s steward. “When your

charges arrive, I want them to stand before me. I will determine what they eat for dinner tonight.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ashpenaz then hobbled slowly across to his seat and lay his staff against the table. The days in bed must have weakened his knees, he thought. Leaning back until he tipped his center of balance, he fell into his chair with a deep sigh. Then he reached for the staff, cradling it in the crook of his arm and leaning it against his chest.

As the hall began to fill up, he scanned the boys’ faces. All of them looked sallow to him. None of them pleased him, as Daniel had. Daniel of the straight back and the gold eyes. He imagined Daniel gaunt and tired, after ten days of only vegetables. Ashpenaz hoped he was broken — it would be easier to dismiss him if he’d lost his spark. Someone in the back of the room waved a hand, catching his eye. He glanced over to see Daniel, smiling and tall as ever. The steward grabbed Daniel and spoke to him, and he nodded in reply. Then he turned to the others and they all followed him up toward the head table. Even from this distance, Ashpenaz could see the fire in the boy’s eyes.

As the Hebrews lined up in front of the table, Daniel spoke with a smile, “My lord, you said I would risk your head if the king saw me in poor condition. Our ten days are over, what do you say?”

Ashpenaz stood and held out his staff toward Daniel. Had he grown more handsome in the last ten days? His eyes were so deep, his posture so straight, and he seemed to have gained some weight. Ashpenaz looked at the others. They, too, looked fatter and their complexions ruddier.

He looked out at the non-Hebrew boys, all sitting quietly, staring back at him. One of the boys sitting at the front table had stooped shoulders, another was grinning and showing his terrible overbite. They all looked, to Ashpenaz, like stupefied monkeys. He looked back at Daniel. He was no longer grinning, just standing, staring into Ashpenaz — through him and into the future. Ashpenaz could not hold him back, could not hold him close, even if he desired it. He sighed deeply, “Daniel, you and the Hebrews may continue to eat as you wish. My lord, the king and I desire only your health. And if vegetables will make you healthy, as it seems they have, then eat only vegetables.” He turned to the steward. “Hold back their portions of royal food and fine wine.”

Finished, Ashpenaz sat his staff down on the table, dismissing Daniel and his friends with the gesture. They turned quickly, and he watched Daniel return to his seat. The lad was already laughing and arguing some point of law with the boy named Meshach — the last ten days forgotten. Ashpenaz sighed and sat back down, reaching for his goblet of wine. He was tired, and he could feel his heart beating too hard. He pulled his eyes off Daniel and scanned the room, wondering which of those sallow-faced boys would replace him when his heart finally stopped beating.

ANALYSIS

Like the book of Esther, Daniel is the story of a Jew in a foreign court. It wrestles with the question of how a follower of YHWH should relate to the dominant culture when that culture is religiously antithetical to the Yawhist's beliefs. The answer for Daniel is to stand strong and resist the pressure toward syncretism. Within the apocalyptic context of the narrative, Daniel and his friends are heroes because of their rigid and uncompromising faith.

Jewish apocalyptic literature arose between the fifth century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., as a response to the hellenization of the Jewish population.¹¹ The genre is at its heart a literature of "protest and resistance" to the encroaching dominant culture.¹² Unfortunately, while the apocalyptic world-view may be useful for protecting the distinct identity of a people, it too-often leads to demonization of the "other." If the dominant culture is viewed as evil, then its representatives become the pawns of evil, and any actions taken on behalf of one's God and one's people against the threat of the dominant culture are justified — whether or not those actions hurt people (they're just pawns, after all).

The exercise of reading Daniel from the perspective of the "other" allows us to critique the all-or-nothing mentality of the text. By looking beyond the surface, and questioning the narrator's tidy assumptions about the characters, we can begin to see the real consequences of our hero's actions. Reading chapter one from the perspective of Ashpenaz (treating him not just

¹¹ LaCocque, *The Book of Danie*, 4–5.

¹² André LaCocque, *Daniel in His Time* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1988), 27.

as an instrument by which God advances Daniel but as a human being with a life of his own) brings into relief the question of whether Daniel’s actions are more to be avoided than emulated.

The character of Ashpenaz is merely an agent in the plot of the book of Daniel. He functions as the prototypical representative of the Babylonian empire — the first among many. As I’ve already mentioned, the apocalypticism of Daniel creates an “Us vs. Them” mentality in the story. The plot consists of a series of conflicts between the Hebrew protagonists and their Babylonian overlords. In chapter’s two through six, these overlords are kings, to whom Daniel and his friends are advisors. In Dan 1:3–21, the young Hebrew men are not yet ready to advise kings, so Ashpenaz serves the plot in the role of Babylonian overlord. His actions and interests serve mainly to foreshadow those of the kings who will follow him in chapters two through six. And the narrator gives the reader little information about him except what is necessary for the plot. However, these few details point to a character with feelings and perhaps dreams that run much deeper than the narrator or Daniel cares to notice.

Ashpenaz is first introduced with the title *רַב־סָרִיס* *rab sārîs*, often translated chief eunuch,¹³ and then later referred to exclusively as *שָׂרִיסֵי הַסָּרִיסִים* *šar hassārîsîm*, meaning literally “official of the eunuchs.” The first phrase is most certainly a title, similar to the Akkadian titles *rab-mugi* (perhaps chief diviner or chief prince) and *rab šaqē(h)* (chief cupbearer).¹⁴ There are three other instances of *rab sārîs* in the Hebrew Scriptures,¹⁵ but in

¹³ *BDB*, 913.

¹⁴ *HALOT* 3, 1173; *BDB*, 913.

¹⁵ 2 Kgs 18:17; Jer 39:3,13.

each, the titled person is merely listed with no contextual clues as to the meaning of the title.

That a *rab* is a leader, however, is evidenced by the few identifiable biblical characters who hold this title. The most famous *rab* is Nebuzaradan, the commander of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, whom the NRSV calls “the captain (*rab*) of the guard.”¹⁶ Likewise, the captain of the boat Jonah takes to Tarshish is referred to as the *rab*.¹⁷ And the leaders who feast with King Ahasuerus in the first chapter of Esther are referred to as the *rab* of his house.¹⁸ The English word chief, though slightly archaic, roughly encompasses these three types of people — chief of the guard, chief of the boat, and chiefs. Therefore, “chief eunuch” is a legitimate translation of *rab sārîs*, though the details of exactly what the position of *rab sārîs* entailed is lost to history. One possible clue to the role of a *rab sārîs* — a clue that influenced my interpretation — is that *rab* in Jewish Aramaic can mean master or teacher.¹⁹

As already mentioned, the standard definition of *śar* (as in *śar hassārîsîm*) is “official.” *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* provides “representative of the king” as a primary definition.²⁰ Anyone familiar with biblical Hebrew should be familiar with this word, as it is one of the most common word in the Hebrew Bible, occurring 425 times.²¹

¹⁶ 2 Kgs 25:8–21; Jer 39:9–14, 40:1–5, 41:10, 43:6, 52:12–30.

¹⁷ Jonah 1:6.

¹⁸ Esth 1:8.

¹⁹ *HALOT* 3, 1173.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1350–51.

²¹ Bonnie Pedrotti Kittel, et al, *Biblical Hebrew: A Textbook and Workbook* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 1989), 413.

If we accept the common wisdom that Daniel was compiled by a Jewish writer during the Hellenistic Age and probably during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (167–164 B.C.E.),²² then it is likely the intended audience would not have been any more familiar with the titles of Akkadian and Babylonian officials than a modern reader is. However, they would have been very familiar with the common *šar*. Perhaps this is why the author qualifies the title *rab sārîs* by following it with the more familiar *šar hassārîšim*.

From contextual clues in the biblical text, a reader may gather that a *šar* was a person of authority. We have already mentioned the *šarim* who throw Jeremiah in the cistern in Jer 38, and to whom the king says, “the king is powerless against you” (Jer 38:5 NRSV). In Exodus, Moses chooses able men and appoints them “as heads over the people, as officers [*šarê*] over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens” (Ex 18:25 NRSV). In the books of Samuel and Kings we find numerous examples of *šar* used to refer to commanders of armies.²³ Besides these commanders, there are also places where *šarim* are explicitly said to represent the king. 1 Kings 4:1–19 lists all the officials of King Solomon, who oversaw his affairs in the kingdom. The list begins with the phrase, “these were his high officials [*šarim*]” (4.2 NRSV). Similarly, *šarim* serve as Solomon’s representatives at work projects in 1 Kings 5:16 and 9:23. In the first chapter of 2 Kings, Ahaziah sends three different *šarim* with royal messages for Elijah (1:9–16).

²² Collins, 36; *OAB*, 1126OT.

²³ 1 Sam 8:12; 12:9; 14:50; 17:18, 55; 18:13, 30; 26:5; 29:3, 9; 2 Sam 10:16; 18:1, 5; 19:13; 24:2; 1 Kgs 1:19, 25; 2:5, 32; 11:15, 21; 15:20; 16:9, 16; 22:31–33; 2 Kgs 1:9, 11; 4:13; 5:1; 9:5; 25:19, 23, 26.

The two titles *rab sārîs* and *śar hassārîsîm*, taken together with Ashpenaz’s charge from the king in verses 3–4, give us some idea of Ashpenaz’s role in the court of Babylon. He is a high-ranking official, probably himself a eunuch, responsible for the choosing and training of young men to become eunuch-servants/advisors of the king. To the young eunuchs he is teacher, master, and commander (all possible denotations of *rab*). He is also the official representative of the king (*śar*) to them. As I have imagined him in my retelling, he is the headmaster of a school for eunuchs.²⁴ And, although there is no extra-biblical evidence that such schools existed, this is certainly a possibility within the world of the story.

The narrator also tells us “God allowed Daniel to receive favor [חֶסֶד/*hesed*] and compassion [רַחֲמִים/*raḥamîm*] from” Ashpenaz (1:9 NRSV). The two words translated in the NRSV as “favor” and “compassion” are used quite frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures, but occur together only 11 times.²⁵ Except in Daniel and Zechariah, this pairing appears exclusively in poetic references to the magnitude of God’s love.²⁶ In one instance the pairing is used in a speech in which YHWH promises to take back his bride Israel “in steadfast love [*hesed*] and in mercy [*raḥamîm*]” (Hos 2:19 NRSV).

The reference to Ashpenaz’s *hesed* and *raḥamîm* for Daniel serves an important purpose; it emphasizes the narrator’s assumption that Ashpenaz’s motivation is from God. The reader is

²⁴ As I stated in footnote 42 in Chapter 1, although the text does not explicitly state that Daniel and his friends were eunuchs, this possibility has long been thought to be a legitimate reading. This reading is made more certain if we accept that *sārîs* should always be translated “eunuch” — if Ashpenaz is chief eunuch (*rab sārîs*) and official of the eunuchs (*śar hassārîsîm*), it follows that his charges would likely be eunuchs.

²⁵ Isa 63:7; Jer 16:5; Hos 2:21; Zech 7:9; Pss 25:6, 40:11; 51:1, 69:16, 103:4; Lam 3:22; Dan 1:9.

²⁶ In Zech 7:9, God commands, “show kindness [*hesed*] and mercy [*raḥamîm*] to one another” (NRSV).

reminded of all the times God's *hesed* and *raḥamîm* have been invoked by the psalmists and the prophets, and resonates with the power of the phrase "God allowed" (1:9). Remember, the plot of Daniel is a series of conflicts between the Hebrew protagonists and Babylonian authorities, but the apocalyptic theme is that YHWH is always the ultimate authority. The book begins with Nebuchadnezzar sacking Jerusalem, while the narrator reminds the reader, "The Lord *let* King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power" (1:2 NRSV, italic added). In the chapters that follow, YHWH will strike Nebuchadnezzar with madness (4:28–33), and strike his son Belshazzar dead (5:24–30). And Daniel will have a series of dreams emphasizing YHWH's authority over all earthly rulers (chapters 7–12). Just like Nebuchadnezzar and all the kings who will follow, Ashpenaz represents the authority of earthly realms, restricted and influenced (according to the narrator) by the power of YHWH. But, there is more to this phrase than a reminder of God's influence. When we look at the words individually, we find they emphasize the depth of Ashpenaz's love for Daniel.

In her important work on the subject, Katherine Doob Sakenfeld offers the English "loyalty" as a possible translation of the word *hesed*.²⁷ In a survey of the biblical stories where *hesed* is used, Sakenfeld finds that the ancient Hebrew notion of *hesed* included a "holding together of free decision and obligation" and "incorporated the idea of aid provided for another who was in extreme need."²⁸ Biblical *hesed* implies a free taking on of the responsibility for another, even

²⁷ Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

though that responsibility could easily be shirked. It is therefore a kind of free-will commitment to another — an active faithfulness.²⁹ For example, in the story of Jonathan and David, when David has been forced to flee Saul’s house, he urges Jonathan to show *hesed* to him by following a plan to test Saul’s intentions toward David.³⁰ In this situation, Jonathan as prince is free to do as he wishes, but chooses to help the more vulnerable David because of the value of their relationship. Later, after Jonathan is dead and David has become king, he remembers his relationship with Jonathan and asks, “Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness [*hesed*] for Jonathan’s sake?” (2 Sam 9:1 NRSV). He then brings Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth into his house and feeds him from his own table as a sign of his loyalty toward Jonathan. In this second case it is David who chooses to freely act out of *hesed* in helping the vulnerable Mephibosheth. Likewise in Genesis 20, Abraham invokes *hesed* when asking Sarah to protect him against foreign kings by saying she is his sister.³¹ Abraham recognizes that Sarah may act as she chooses, but places himself at the mercy of her loyalty to him. In the context of Ashpenaz’s relationship to Daniel, *hesed* implies Ashpenaz’s serious commitment to Daniel’s well-being, while affirming that Ashpenaz has no actual obligation in the matter.

The second word in the phrase, *rahāmîm*, has more of an emotional tint. As Phyllis Tribble points out, “In its singular form the noun *reḥem* means ‘womb’ or ‘uterus.’ In the plural,

²⁹ Ibid., 103.

³⁰ 1 Sam 20:8.

³¹ Gen 20:13.

raḥamîm, this concrete meaning expands to the abstractions of compassion, mercy, and love.”³²

For Tribble, the classic example of this emotion is the case of the two women who come before Solomon each claiming to be the mother of the same baby. When Solomon threatens to cut the baby in two and give each mother half, the true mother calls out to give the living boy to the other, “because compassion [*raḥamîm*] for her son burned within her” (1 Kgs 3:26 NRSV). Here the allusion to the mother’s womb burning with [com]passion for her child is clear. The same is true of God’s passion for the children of God’s womb. Isaiah 54:7 says, “with great compassion [*raḥamîm*] I will gather you” (NRSV). “[T]hus says the LORD,” in Zechariah 1:16, “I have returned to Jerusalem with compassion [*raḥamîm*]” (NRSV). As Tribble says, “the place of birth is the vehicle of compassion. To create is to love.”³³ We find this in our story, as Ashpenaz fosters love and compassion for the young Daniel who he is re-creating for the service of the king. However, *raḥamîm* is not always confined to the womb and the act of creating.

Another famous example is that of Joseph. In Genesis 43, Joseph meets his youngest brother, Benjamin, for the first time since being sold to Egypt. Due to the circumstances of their lives, Benjamin does not know who Joseph is and Joseph does not reveal himself. Instead, he speaks to him as if he is a stranger and then quickly leaves, “for his compassion [*raḥamîm*] burned for his brother” (au. trans.). The construction of the phrase is identical to that of 1 Kgs 3:25, but this time the person whose womb burns is a man, and the object of his affection is not a son but a brother. The emotive power of the word *raḥamîm* is nevertheless the same. It is this word,

³² Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 55.

encompassing the deep love of a mother for her newborn, of God for the children of God, and of a brother for his long lost sibling, that the narrator uses to describe Ashpenaz's feelings for Daniel. The combination of *hesed* and *rahāmîm* provides a sense of deep feeling and commitment.

In the introduction to this thesis, I proposed that issues of gender identity and sexual orientation must be addressed when discussing stories of eunuchs in the Hebrew Scriptures whenever the biblical stories make such discussions reasonable. In this context, the description of Ashpenaz's deep feelings for and commitment to Daniel establishes the possibility that the author, a Jew living in the Hellenistic world where eunuchs were often associated with homosexuality, would have intended readers to assume that Ashpenaz had romantic feelings for Daniel. This would certainly explain why Ashpenaz is willing to risk his own head for Daniel, and why he does not punish Daniel when he ignores Ashpenaz's refusal of his request. As Friend Owl said to Bambi, "When you get twitterpated, you get weak in the knees. Your head starts to whirl. Before you know it, you're knocked for a loop."

While this is one possibility, I have chosen a more complicated reading in my retelling. As I have imagined him, Ashpenaz is indeed what we today would call homosexual. However, his feelings for Daniel are much more than a crush inspired by a handsome face. Besides being attracted to Daniel, he admires him and sees in Daniel the heir he thought he would never have. These feelings are further complicated by the love of creator for his creation. In short, the Ashpenaz of my story possesses a complex love. He has genuine affection for Daniel and wants what's best for him, while at the same time being attracted to him and wanting to hold him too

close. His attractions and his affections battle, while his sense of responsibility keeps him from overstepping his role as teacher and leader.

It is into this complicated relationship of loyalty and compassion, colored by sexual attraction and power imbalance, that Daniel brings his resolution not to eat the king's rich foods and drink the king's fine wines. We are not told how soon Daniel comes to this conclusion, or why he chooses to respond as he does to the king's food. The narrator's explanation that he does not want to defile himself is of little help. A person can be defiled by blood and by eating certain meats,³⁴ but there are no prohibitions against drinking wine.³⁵ The decision, it would seem, is fueled not by zeal for religious law but by a desire to make a stand against the political power of the king. Remember that in the apocalyptic worldview, the dominant culture represents a force to be resisted at all costs. Unfortunately for Ashpenaz, he and the food he provides from the king's table are symbols of that dominant culture, and are therefore to be shunned. Just as the three Hebrews, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, will later refuse to bow to the king's image in chapter three, Daniel refuses to bow to the king's wishes in chapter one. Ashpenaz is, to Daniel, merely a representative of the evil empire.

Both Fewell and Collins, in their analyses of this chapter, buy into the apocalyptic worldview of the text and see the royal food in terms of political power and allegiance. Fewell makes this point, by comparing the actions of Nebuchadnezzar to those of David with Mephibosheth (2 Sam

³⁴ See Lev 11:1–23, 17:10–16; Is 59:3; and Lam 4:14. W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 25.

³⁵ Danna Nolan Fewell, *Circle of Sovereignty: a Story of Stories in Daniel 1–6* (Decatur, Georgia: Almond 1988), 39.

9:9–13) and of the king of Babylon with the exiled Jehoiachin (2 Kings 25:27–29).³⁶ Collins points to Gen 43:34 (Joseph and his brothers) and 2 Sam 11:8 (David and Uriah) as examples of honorary gifts coming from the king's table.³⁷ But I believe that in addition to the political nature of the royal food there is another aspect often missed by commentators — gifts (even royal gifts) are sometimes just gifts. In fact, two of the examples used by Fewell and Collins have already been discussed in our consideration of the words *hesed* and *raḥamîm*.

Is it not possible that David's kind treatment of Mephibosheth is fueled by his *hesed* for Jonathan, just as he says? And isn't it likely that the fine food Joseph feeds his brothers is a manifestation of his *raḥamîm* burning for them? Likewise, in my narrative I have Ashpenaz insist on giving Daniel the choicest portions from the royal rations, simply because he loves Daniel and wants him fat and happy. Yes, the royal rations are a symbol of the power Ashpenaz — and ultimately the king — has over Daniel, but the royal rations are also a way for Ashpenaz and the king to give generously out of the abundance of their stores. In this way, the gift has a double-edge, much like the gifts of David to Mephibosheth, and of Joseph to his brothers cited by Fewell and Collins. In each case there are political undertones, but there is also genuine affection.

For this reason, Daniel's resolution is not just a political statement but a personal insult. He is refusing a gift, albeit a gift of an oppressive king. For Ashpenaz, with his deep feelings and loyalty toward Daniel, the resolution against defilement is much more than a general political

³⁶ Ibid., 37.

³⁷ Collins, 140.

statement. In the story as I imagine it, Ashpenaz feels genuine pain when he realizes that Daniel wants nothing to do with his special gifts of food and wine. He is trying to do what's best for Daniel, and Daniel throws the kindness back in his face. This brings us to the decisive act of rebellion on the part of Daniel.

Ashpenaz's response to Daniel's resolution is "sympathetic, but realistic."³⁸ He gives Daniel a diplomatic rejoinder, appealing to Daniel's compassion: "I fear my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king" (1:10 NRSV). Daniel does not verbally respond to Ashpenaz's appeal, but immediately turns around and asks the guard (חַמֶּלְשָׁר/hammelšar) assigned to him to test him and the other Hebrews with vegetables and water for ten days.

The title of *melšar* probably derives from the Akkadian *maššaru*, meaning "guard,"³⁹ and from verse 11 we ascertain that the *melšar* is a lower official, assigned by Ashpenaz to Daniel and his friends. Within the story, the *melšar*'s only named duty is to serve the young men their food and drink. For this reason, I believe "steward" is a legitimate translation.

What makes Daniel's actions extraordinary is the dual fact that he would go to this lower official after Ashpenaz has rebuffed him and that he would do it so quickly. In Hebrew, the space between the two actions is a single letter — the conjunction vav. The impact of Daniel's action is

³⁸ Fewell, 40.

³⁹ Collins, 144; *BDB*, 576.

put into relief if we imagine it happening in the same room as the conversation with Ashpenaz, perhaps at a meal as it happens in my retelling.

This is where my retelling moves outside the text, to portray Ashpenaz as a more fully-developed character. If Ashpenaz indeed has deep feelings for Daniel, then he probably sees his training and feeding as acts of kindness. He is providing for Daniel in the best way he knows how. But Daniel sees Ashpenaz's actions only in terms of his dualistic worldview, YHWH is good and the Babylonian empire is bad. The result is that Daniel insults Ashpenaz and tramples on his love, in the name of religious fervor and political zeal.

In the end, the narrator tells us, God gives Daniel and his four friends wisdom and understanding ten times more than any of the other young men — and to Daniel insight into visions and dreams. (1:17, 20) The narrator implies, without explicitly saying so, that this is a result of the four young men's rigid religious stance. Just as they appear fatter and healthier as a result of their resolve not to "defile" themselves, so they are wiser and more knowledgeable as well. However, the reader is left to wonder if this is really the best way to gain good things from God.

Would a God who commands, "show kindness [*hesed*] and mercy [*rahamim*] to one another" (Zech 7:9 NRSV) or who desires "steadfast love [*hesed*] and not sacrifice" (Hos 6:6 NRSV) also desire for Daniel to sacrifice Ashpenaz's steadfast love (*hesed*) and compassion (*rahamim*) for political ends? Within the apocalyptic world-view of the narrative, the answer is a resounding yes, and the story of Daniel and Ashpenaz sets the stage for the stories that will follow — stories of defiance in the face of fiery furnaces and lion's dens. However, reading from

the perspective of the “other,” the answers are not quite so clear. If the narrator is right, then Ashpenaz is given his *hesed* and *rahamim* only so Daniel can save himself from defilement and eventually leave Ashpenaz for greener pastures. The men who die throwing Shadrach, Meshach, and Ebed-Nego into the fiery furnace (3:22) are collateral damage. And the wives and children whose bones are broken in pieces before they even hit the floor of the lion’s den (6:24) deserve their punishment for being pawns of the evil empire. But, reading from the perspective of Ashpenaz, we wonder if God — who so often is attributed with steadfast love (*hesed*) and compassion (*rahamim*) — might possibly be like a certain chief eunuch who was willing to overlook grave offense and deep hurt because of his love for a zealous young man.