



The Book of Daniel

Daniel 1 and 2: The Setting

Daniel chapter 1 begins with an historical problem. According to 2 Kings 24 and the Babylonian Chronicle, the first siege of Jerusalem, in 597 BCE, took place after the death of Jehoiakim, although Jehoiakim had been subject to Babylon for three years. His son Jehoiachin succeeded him as king. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin to Babylon, and also took the temple treasures. According to 2 Chronicles 36: 5-8, however, Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiakim prisoner to Babylon and also took the temple vessels. It appears that Chronicles and Daniel confused the two kings of Judah. The Book of Daniel here is only concerned to set the scene and explain how Daniel and his companions came to be in Babylon. We will meet the temple vessels again in Daniel 5.

Daniel and his friends are singled out for the royal service because they are promising young men, without physical defect. They are to be taught the language and literature of the Chaldeans. This is not implausible. The Babylonians sought to co-opt the best of the peoples they conquered. Later, in the Persian period, Nehemiah would become cup-bearer to the king, a position of considerable responsibility.

The main issue raised in chapter 1 is the degree to which Daniel and his friends would assimilate to customs of their conquerors. They by no means refuse to enter the royal service, but they place a limit on their assimilation by refusing the royal food and asking for vegetables instead. Most readers assume that they are concerned to observe kashrut, the food laws derived mainly from the book of Leviticus. But we do not find any clear references to the Torah in Daniel 1-6. Some scholars explain the refusal to eat the royal fare as a gesture of political resistance, and a way of maintaining a measure of independence. It is difficult to believe, however, that the refusal is not related to food laws. Even if Daniel is not specifically following the laws of the Torah, some observances, such as the avoidance of pork, were traditional long before the Torah was formalized.

Daniel and his friends flourish on their vegetarian diet. The point, of course, is not to recommend vegetarianism, but to assert that Jews would not suffer if they refused Gentile ways but would rather be blessed by their God. Already here we find a tension characteristic of life in Diaspora. Maintaining difference, and a distinct identity, poses obvious risks, but those risks can be overcome by divine help.

Chapter 2

The importance of divine aid is also central to Daniel 2. The king has a troubling dream and summons his wise men and diviners. The Babylonians had developed divination into a science, which was widely respected in the ancient world. Daniel is not the only biblical book that takes issue with Babylonian divination. Second Isaiah also mocks the Babylonian diviners for failing to predict the downfall of Babylon and the restoration of Israel (e.g. Isa 45:20-21). In this case, however, the diviners are presented with an impossible task. The king demands that they not only interpret his dream but tell him the dream itself. When they cannot, he becomes furious and orders their execution. The order applies even to Daniel and his friends, although they had not been consulted at all. This kind of irrational behavior is typically attributed to tyrants. It gives the whole story the character of a caricature.

Daniel, however, pleads with the king and is given more time to come up with an interpretation. He does this by praying to his God, who reveals to him the dream and interpretation. This knowledge is not available to the Babylonian diviners, because they do not know the God of Daniel. Daniel makes this point clear to the king: "No wise men, enchanters, magicians or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (2:27-28).

Daniel then proceeds to narrate the king's dream, which involves a statue with various metals. The head was made of pure gold, the legs and arms of silver, the thighs of bronze, and the feet were partly iron and partly clay. Daniel interprets it in terms of a sequence of kingdoms. Quite diplomatically, he tells the king: "you are the head of gold." God has given him power over the whole earth. He will be followed, however, by an inferior kingdom, represented in the statue by silver. Then there will be a third, bronze, kingdom. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, but mixed with clay. This kingdom will not remain united. Then the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed or pass to another people.

The Four Kingdoms

Daniel is less explicit than he might have been in his interpretation of the dream. Its implications only become apparent when we read it in light of other texts. The most famous of these texts is in Daniel 7, which again speaks of a sequence of four kingdoms, followed by a kingdom of God. But in fact, such a sequence was a popular motif in ancient history, especially in the Roman period. The kingdoms are usually identified as Assyria, Media, Persia and Greece. The first three are found already in the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. The Assyrians did not actually rule the whole world, but they ruled the whole Near East. The sequence reflects an eastern, probably Persian, viewpoint. This is shown by the fact that Media is included as a world kingdom. (Media's kingdom never extended to the west or included Judah). The schema of four kingdoms appears in a Persian text, the Bahman Yasht, which is several centuries later in its extant form, but is thought to be adapted from a much older text, from the Achaemenid period (= the biblical Persian period, 539 – 333 BCE)

Daniel substitutes Babylon for Assyria. (Assyria still appears as the first kingdom in the Fourth Sibylline Oracle, a Jewish text that dates, in its present form, from the first century CE). This is clear from the fact that Nebuchadnezzar is identified as the head of gold. Daniel does not identify the other kingdoms in chapter 2, but in Dan 5:31 we are told that Darius the Mede received the kingdom. As we have already seen, no such person is known to history. He seems to have been invented to fit the schema, since Media was supposed to be the second kingdom. Then at the end of chapter 6, Cyrus of Persia appears. The second half of the book reverts to the period of Babylonian rule. Chapters 7 and 8 are dated to the reign of Belshazzar, chapters 9 and 10 to the reign of Darius the Mede, and chapters 10-12 to the reign of Cyrus of Persia. In Dan 10:20, Daniel is told that after the prince of Persia the prince of Greece will come. It is apparent then that for Daniel the four kingdoms are Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece. The Greek kingdom of Alexander was divided among his generals. From the Jewish perspective, the most important of these were Seleucus, who founded the Seleucid dynasty in Syria, and Ptolemy, who founded the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. The mixture of iron and clay is given another explanation, in reference to marriages between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies, which did not succeed in achieving peace and harmony between the kingdoms (Dan 2:43).

After the rise of Rome in the second century BCE, it was incorporated into the sequence as the fourth kingdom. This was usually accomplished by combining Media and Persia as one kingdom. By New Testament times, Rome was well established as the fourth kingdom, and this interpretation survived until the rise in critical scholarship in modern times.

Four Metals

Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its interpretation is informed by another schema that was well known in the ancient world. The Greek poet Hesiod (about 700 BCE) had written of four ages of human history, symbolized by metals of declining value, beginning with gold and ending with iron. The iron age was dire. Hesiod expressed his wish that he either have been born earlier or later. (The possibility that he could be born later raises the question whether the schema was supposed to repeat itself). Hesiod's iron age was not mixed with clay. (Incidentally the Persian Bahman Yasht described the fourth kingdom as "iron mixed"). The iron age, then, was the nadir of history. Applied to the four kingdoms, this implies a very negative judgment on the Greek age. Nonetheless, the judgment in Daniel 2 is not nearly as negative as what we will find in Daniel 7. Daniel 2 was probably written before the crisis of the Maccabean era, which provides the setting for Daniel 7-12.

The King's Reaction

Nebuchadnezzar receives the interpretation with remarkable sang-froid. The dream predicts the demise of the Babylonian kingdom. Admittedly, Daniel does not quite make this clear to the king, since he does not identify the later kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar can take satisfaction from the knowledge that future kingdoms will not measure up to his own. He could even suppose

that the kingdom set up by the God of Heaven will be a restored Babylonian kingdom, and a return to the Golden Age. For the Jewish reader, the stone cut from the mountain is an allusion to Mt. Zion, and can only represent a Jewish kingdom, but this is not made clear to the king. Besides, this development is still in the distant future. Eschatology here is deferred. Of course, it was not so far in the future in the Hellenistic period, when the chapter was actually written. Nonetheless, it does not promise an immediate overthrow of Gentile power. Throughout Daniel 1-6, the emphasis is on how Jews can live under foreign rule, not on how it can be overthrown. Individual kings and kingdoms are overthrown, but they are followed by other Gentile kingdoms.

The king in any case is impressed not so much by the content of the dream as by the fact that Daniel can narrate and interpret it. Nebuchadnezzar, we are told, prostrated himself before Daniel, and ordered that offerings be made to him. He acknowledges the supremacy of Daniel's God, as Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries. He promotes Daniel and his friends to high office. Daniel is placed in charge of all the wise men of Babylon. To be sure, this reaction is hyperbolic. The idea that Nebuchadnezzar would prostrate himself before a Jewish exile is wishful thinking, with scant regard for historical plausibility. The king will acknowledge the God of the Judeans again in chapters 3 and 4, but each time he seems to forget about it again. These stories probably circulated independently before they were brought together. The quasi-conversion of the king at the end is a generic element in these tales.

As Daniel 2 is structured, the main point is the superiority of Daniel to the Babylonian diviners, a superiority that is due to the greater power of his God. The content of the dream might seem to be incidental to this point. But the dream is important for the Book of Daniel because it shows the structure of history in this book and anticipates the great vision in Chapter 7. The motif of the four kingdoms helps bind the book together.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream has continued to fascinate people through the ages. The Dispensationalist movement of the 19th century, inspired by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) interpreted Daniel 2 as an outline of history down to its own time, and represented this in colorful form on a large chart. This kind of fundamentalist literalism has also been applied to other parts of Daniel, as we shall see when we consider chapter 9, but it is misguided.

The dream and its interpretation, however, capture an important aspect of the apocalyptic theology of Daniel. It affirms that all human kingdoms will eventually pass away. This knowledge has often given hope to the oppressed, and it has been repeatedly vindicated in the course of history. The final kingdom of God that will never pass to another people, has yet to appear.