

**2. DANIEL INTERPRETS
NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DREAM**

DANIEL 2:4-49

⁴The Chaldeans said to the king (in Aramaic), "O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will reveal the interpretation." ⁵The king answered the Chaldeans, "This is a public decree: if you do not tell me both the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. ⁶But if you do tell me the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honour. Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation." ⁷They answered a second time, "Let the king first tell his servants the dream, then we can give its interpretation." ⁸The king answered, "I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see I have firmly decreed: ⁹if you do not tell me the dream, there is but one verdict for you. You have agreed to speak lying and misleading words to me until things take a turn. Therefore, tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation." ¹⁰The Chaldeans answered the king, "There is no one on earth who can reveal what the king demands! In fact no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. ¹¹The thing that the king is asking is too difficult, and no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals." ¹²Because of this the king flew into a violent rage and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed.

As noted in the Introduction (page 88), this is the first of the 'court tales' collected in the Book of Daniel.

The Aramaic word for 'public decree' [אֲזְדָּא, 'azdâ'] in verse 5 is borrowed from Persian, as is the word for 'limb'. Though Aramaic was the most widely language spoken in the Persian Empire, it is not surprising that the diverse languages of different national groups would influence each other.

In verse 11, the Aramaic 'gods' [לְאֵלֵי הַמַּיִם, 'lāhîn] is translated in the Old Greek as 'angels'. The 'Theodotion' Greek Version retains 'gods'.

One has the impression from verse 16 that Daniel is already known to the king and is free to approach him. Verses 24-28 give a different impression.

The expression ‘God of heaven’ (verse 18) is found eleven times in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Aramaic 𐤓𐤏𐤁𐤁 [rāzâ] translated here as ‘mystery’ is a loan word from Persian. The Old Greek translates it ‘mysterion’. Here, and into the New Testament (see, for example, Colossians 4:3, ‘the mystery of Christ’) it denotes something revealed by God, which could otherwise not be known. The ‘Theodotion’ Greek Version translates ‘revealed’ by ‘apokalyptō’ (whence the English ‘apocalypse’). It is revealed in a ‘vision’ [𐤏𐤍𐤏𐤁, ḥezwā; compare Isaiah 29:7; Job 4:13). This is derived from the verb ‘to enlighten’.

In verses 20-23, Daniel praises God for the blessing God has given him, in enlightening him by giving him a share in God’s ‘wisdom and power’.

¹³The decree was issued, and the wise men were about to be executed; and they looked for Daniel and his companions, to execute them also.

¹⁴Then Daniel prudently took counsel with Arioch, the king’s chief executioner, who had gone out to execute the wise men of Babylon; ¹⁵he asked Arioch, the royal official, “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel.

¹⁶So Daniel went in and requested that the king give him time and he would tell the king the interpretation.

¹⁷Then Daniel went to his home and informed his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹⁸and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions with the rest of the wise men of Babylon might not perish.

¹⁹Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night, and Daniel blessed the God of heaven.

²⁰Daniel said: “Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his. ²¹He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. ²²He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. ²³To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you, for you have revealed to us what the king ordered.”

²⁴Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will give the king the interpretation."

²⁵Then Arioch quickly brought Daniel before the king and said to him: "I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who can tell the king the interpretation." ²⁶The king said to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, "Are you able to tell me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?"

²⁷Daniel answered the king, "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, ²⁸but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in the end of the days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed were these: ²⁹To you, O king, as you lay in bed, came thoughts of what would be hereafter, and the revealer of mysteries disclosed to you what is to be. ³⁰But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me because of any wisdom that I have more than any other living being, but in order that the interpretation may be known to the king and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind.

³¹"You were looking, O king, and lo! there was a great statue. This statue was huge, its brilliance extraordinary; it was standing before you, and its appearance was frightening. ³²The head of that statue was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, ³³its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. ³⁴As you looked on, a stone was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. ³⁵Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

In this version of the story Daniel approaches the chief executioner and declares that he will interpret the king's dream for him. Arioch proceeds to introduce Daniel (his Babylonian name is Belteshazzar, see 1:7) to the king.

Daniel speaks of the 'God in heaven who reveals mysteries' (compare 2:18), and tells him his dream is about what will happen 'in the end of the days' (compare Hosea 3:5; Isaiah 2:2). This refers to a definitive change to take place in the future, but not to the end of history (see Daniel 10:14).

In verses 31-35 Daniel recounts to the king the content of the king's dream: the dream that so disturbed the king's sleep (see 2:1). Dreams involving large statues are found in other Near Eastern texts, as is the use of precious metals in such statues. The motif of the mountain is distinctly Jewish (see Isaiah 2:2).

A scheme of four successive empires (Assyrian, Babylonian, Mede and Persian) appears to have originated in Persia. The fifth century BC Greek historian, Herodotus, refers to the successive kingdoms of the Assyrians, Medes and Persians (*The Histories*, Book 1.95.130). He claims to be drawing on Persian sources. This was picked up by a Roman historian, Polybius, writing late in the second century BC, who added a fourth kingdom, the Macedonian, and then a fifth, Rome, which conquers the areas once dominated by the four previous world empires (*The Histories* 38.22). From this it is clear that Daniel is echoing a way of schematising that was current at the time. Daniel simply substitutes Babylon for Assyria. However, there is a problem with this schema: the kingdom of the Medes did not come after that of the Babylonians. Media was conquered by the Persian, Cyrus, in 550, eleven years before he conquered Babylon.

The head of gold (verse 32) is identified as the kingdom of Babylon (verses 37-38), given to Nebuchadnezzar by God. The upper body of silver (verse 32) is presumably the inferior kingdom of Media (verse 39). The lower body of bronze (verse 32) is presumably the kingdom of Persia (verse 39), the legs of iron (verse 33) is the Macedonian kingdom of Alexander the Great (verse 40), and the divided kingdom of baked clay (verse 38) represents the situation at the time of the publishing of the Book of Daniel: the kingdoms of the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria (verses 41-43). The reference to the Macedonian kingdom points to the Hellenistic period as the time when the court tales were collected.

We know of two attempts to achieve peace through marriage between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids (see Daniel 11:6, 17). Antiochus II married Berenice, the daughter of Ptolemy II, in 252BC; and Ptolemy V married Cleopatra, the daughter of Antiochus III, in 193-192BC. Both attempts failed to cement an alliance (verse 43).

³⁶“This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation.

³⁷You, O king, the king of kings – to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory, ³⁸into whose hand he has given human beings, wherever they live, the wild animals of the field, and the birds of the air, and whom he has established as ruler over them all – you are the head of gold.

³⁹After you shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over the whole earth.

⁴⁰And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron; just as iron crushes and smashes everything, it shall crush and shatter all these. ⁴¹As you saw the feet and toes partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the strength of iron shall be in it, as you saw the iron mixed with the clay.

⁴²As the toes of the feet were part iron and part clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³As you saw the iron mixed with clay, so will they mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.

⁴⁴And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever; ⁴⁵just as you saw that a stone was cut from the mountain not by hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has informed the king what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation trustworthy."

⁴⁶Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face, worshipped Daniel, and commanded that a grain offering and incense be offered to him.

⁴⁷The king said to Daniel, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!"

⁴⁸Then the king promoted Daniel, gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.

⁴⁹Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.

It is probable that in the original story verse 44 promised a restoration of the Babylonian Empire. In Jewish hands the stone (verse 45) was introduced and interpreted as the kingdom of Judah which would reduce all previous kingdoms to dust (verses 44-45). It 'will never be destroyed'.

The writers of the Newer Testament apply this stone to Christ (see especially Luke 20:18).

By presenting Daniel, a wise and righteous exile from Judah, as being graced by God to foresee the future from his own time down to the period of the Ptolemies and Seleucids, the story is reminding those listening that whatever is happening falls within the providence of the God of Israel, the Lord of history.

While there is no reference in the story to the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the story, as it is incorporated into the Book of Daniel, functions as an encouragement to those suffering its horrors.

By stating that all these kingdoms will be crushed and that the Kingdom that God will set up 'will never be destroyed, nor will this kingdom ever be delivered up to another people'(verse 44), the story is assuring the people of Judah that Israel will ultimately prevail. They must not surrender their faith, and they must remain faithful to the covenant, whatever they may suffer as a tiny district in the vast Greek Empire.

The fact that Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as recognising and worshipping Israel's God as present and active in Daniel reinforces the obvious point that we are not reading history, but rather a pious and encouraging story. The promotion of Daniel's three companions sets the scene for the next story.