

6. DANIEL IN THE LION'S DEN

DANIEL 6:2-29

Worship must be only of the king

²It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom, ³and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss.

⁴Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom.

⁵So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. ⁶The men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in his religious practice."

⁷So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, "O King Darius, live forever!

⁸All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. ⁹Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked."

¹⁰Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.

This begins with verse 1 in the Latin Vulgate and many English versions. We are following the numbering of the Aramaic text and the 'Theodotion' Version. Here, as in chapters 4 and 5 there are differences in the Old Greek Version. It is likely that the Aramaic Version we are following here was subject to editorial additions.

The Aramaic word translated here as 'satrap' in a loan word from Persian. It means 'protector of the realm'. A satrap was the king's viceroy in a province. He was responsible for security and for raising tax. The word translated here as 'president' is also borrowed from Persian. It is not clear what their responsibilities were.

Earlier stories have noted Daniel's advancement in the public administration of the empire. In verse 5 we are told that Darius (see comment on 6:1) had it in mind to place him over all the other dignitaries. This aroused their jealousy and they conspire to trap him through his known religious fidelity to the God of the Jews.

The Persian kings never insisted on exclusive worship of their god. This story betrays a Jewish, not a Persian, outlook.

While history knows nothing of a 'Darius the Mede', it was Darius I of Persia (522-486) who was responsible for dividing the huge empire into large regions called satrapies, which were in turn divided into smaller districts run by governors. The district of Yehud (Judah) was part of the 'Beyond the River' (Euphrates) satrapy.

We are not surprised to hear that Daniel puts the will of his God above the edict of the king. He is discovered praying and this is reported to Darius.

The practice of facing towards the temple when praying began during the exile (see 1Kings 8:35, 44, 48) and continued throughout the diaspora in the years after the exile. Daniel prayed three times a day (see Psalm 55:17). In public people ordinarily prayed standing, but in private kneeling appears to have been common (see Ezra 9:5; and in the Newer Testament, Luke 22:41; Acts 9:40; 20:36).

Because of 'the excellent spirit' (verse 4) in Daniel, and his intention to elevate Daniel to the highest rank in the land, Darius is disappointed at the news, but knows that he cannot go back on his solemn edict (compare Esther 1:19; 8:8). Reluctantly, he gives the command to have Daniel thrown into the lion's den (verse 17) – which was the punishment declared in the edict (verse 8).

He prays that Daniel's God will rescue him, and spends a sleepless night in fasting.

¹¹Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. ¹²The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. ¹³Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, "O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?" The king answered, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." ¹⁴Then they responded to the king, "Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day."

¹⁵When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. ¹⁶Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, "Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed."

¹⁷Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" ¹⁸A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. ¹⁹Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

Darius praises the God of Daniel

²⁰Then, at break of day, the king got up and hurried to the den of lions. ²¹When he came near the den where Daniel was, he cried out anxiously to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?”

²²Daniel then said to the king, “O king, live forever! ²³My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.”

²⁴Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. ²⁵The king gave a command, and those who had accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the den of lions – they, their children, and their wives. Before they reached the bottom of the den the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

²⁶Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: “May you have abundant prosperity! ²⁷I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. ²⁸He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”

²⁹So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

In this story of Daniel’s miraculous escape there are echoes of the escape of his companions from the fiery furnace (chapter 3). In both, deliverance is the result of divine intervention, and in both those who were behind the crime suffer the fate they intended for their victims.

Whereas Daniel’s companions in chapter 3 refused to worship a pagan idol, here in chapter 6 Daniel refused to stop worshipping his God.

It is not difficult to grasp what this was meant to convey to the Jews who were suffering persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

In chapter 3 Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as issuing an edict forbidding anyone to speak ill of the God of Daniel’s companions. Here Darius goes even further. He commands his subjects to revere Daniel’s God and concludes with a typically Jewish hymn in praise of the God of Israel.

The Hebrew Introduction to the Book of Daniel includes the statement that Daniel stayed on in the Babylonian court ‘until the first year of King Cyrus’(1:21).

Verse 29 is consistent with earlier stories that (mistakenly) have the kingdom of the Medes after that of the Babylonians and before that of the Persians (see comment on 5:31).