

4. Daniel 4-5

As Daniel 3 and 6 are paired as stories of miraculous deliverance, so Daniel 4 and 5 are paired as stories in which Daniel confronts a king in a manner that is somewhat reminiscent of the Hebrew prophets.

Daniel 4

Daniel 4 is presented as a proclamation by King Nebuchadnezzar, reporting his amazing experience. The idea for such a proclamation may be prompted by inscriptions of Nabonidus, found at Harran in northern Syria, in which he recounts how he rose to power by divine assistance, but the content of this proclamation is entirely different.

As in Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a troubling dream. In this case, however, he tells the dream to the wise men and diviners, but they are not able to interpret it. Accordingly he calls in Daniel, acknowledging that “the spirit of the holy gods,” or “a holy divine spirit,” is in him.

The dream concerns a huge tree, whose top touches the sky and is visible to the ends of the earth. It provides shelter and food for all creatures. But then a figure who is described as “a watcher, a holy one” appears, and orders that the tree be cut down. (NRSV renders “a holy watcher, but the Aramaic has two nouns). Watchers and holy ones were categories of heavenly beings, what we would call angels. The Watchers appear in the Book of Enoch, which retells the story of the fallen angels from Genesis 6. In that case, the Watchers are fallen angels, but they could also be angels in good standing. We shall meet the holy ones again in the second half of the book, most notably in Daniel 7 where “the holy ones of the Most High” receive the kingdom that is also given to “one like a son of man.” In Daniel 4, the Watcher/Holy One acts as a messenger from heaven. He announces that the tree is to be cut down and its fruit scattered, but

its stump and roots are to be left in the ground. The imagery is somewhat confused at this point. The stump is to be bound with iron and bronze. Trees were sometimes bound with iron to keep them from splitting, and sometimes trees are depicted with metal bands in Assyrian reliefs. In this case, however, the imagery seems to be mixed, as the account of the dream anticipates the interpretation, and switches from speaking of a tree to speaking of a human being, the king. Not only is he to be bound with fetters, but he is to be made like a wild animal in the open field. His mind is to be changed to that of an animal. All this is to happen so that people may know that the Most High is sovereign over human kingdoms.

Daniel is suitably apologetic in interpreting the dream for the king. He begins by expressing the wish that the dream be for the king's enemies. His concern for Nebuchadnezzar troubled later interpreters, because he seemed to be collaborating with a notorious enemy of his people, but it is entirely appropriate in its context. The great tree is the king. We may compare the statement in Jeremiah 28:14 that God had given Nebuchadnezzar dominion over all the earth, and had even given him the wild animals. But now the king is to be driven away from human society, to live with the wild animals for seven years. The fact that the stump is left in the earth shows that the kingdom will in the end be restored. Daniel advises the king to atone for his sins with righteousness (the Hebrew word *tsedaqah* came to mean almsgiving in later times, and may have that meaning already here) and mercy to the oppressed. This passage too was controversial in later times, as it seemed to Protestants of the Reformation era to advocate "works righteousness." Needless to say, the Hebrew Bible does not see anything wrong with works righteousness. On the contrary, good works, specifically care for the disadvantaged, are essential to the biblical concept of righteousness.

At verse 28 the narrative changes to the third person, to describe the transformation of Nebuchadnezzar. His hair became long and his nails like birds' claws. Many people have speculated that he suffered from a form of lycanthropy, a delusion whereby a human being imagines him or herself to be a wild animal. But there is no evidence that Nebuchadnezzar ever suffered from any form of madness. It is now clear that this story originally concerned Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, rather than Nebuchadnezzar. Nabonidus was a devotee of the Moon God, Sin, and went to live in Teima, in the Arabian Desert, for several years. The priests of Marduk in Babylon derided him as mad, and claimed that the fall of Babylon to the Persians was punishment for his neglect of the cult of Marduk. We now have in the Dead Sea Scrolls an early form of the story, called the Prayer of Nabonidus, which identifies the king correctly. In Daniel, the story is transferred to the more famous Nebuchadnezzar, and is further embellished. The depiction of the mighty Nebuchadnezzar as a wild animal must have amused and delighted its Jewish readers. The story has a subversive quality, insofar as it mocks the pretensions of Gentile rule.

It is not, however, a revolutionary story. In the end, Nebuchadnezzar comes to his senses and honors the God of heaven. His recognition of the true God depends on the instruction he has received from Daniel. Similarly, in the Prayer of Nabonidus found at Qumran, the role of the Jewish diviner (who is not named in that text) is to explain to the king which god has caused his misfortune and is able to restore him. In Daniel 4, what happens to Daniel is an exercise to demonstrate that God is able to bring low the proud. Nebuchadnezzar readily acknowledges the point. He comes across in this story as a king who is not irrevocably opposed to the God of Heaven, but needs to learn some difficult lessons.

Daniel 5

Belshazzar, who appears as king in Daniel 5, is a much less sympathetic character than Nebuchadnezzar. There was an historical person named Belshazzar. He was son of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon. He ruled Babylon in his father's absence, but he was never actually king.

Belshazzar is presented as a very arrogant character. In the course of a feast, he orders the vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Jerusalem temple be brought out, and he drinks from them, together with his wives and concubines, and the nobles of the realm. Whether the Babylonians actually preserved the vessels from the Jerusalem temple is open to question. According to 2 Kings 24:13, Nebuchadnezzar had the gold articles taken from the temple cut up after the first capture of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, but many vessels were taken to Babylon after the final destruction in 586. 2 Chronicles 36:10, 18, also claims that the vessels were taken to Babylon. According to Ezra chapter 1, Cyrus of Persia restored to Jerusalem 5,400 articles of gold and silver that had been taken from the temple, but many scholars doubt the historicity of that account.

In this case, the king is confronted by mysterious hand writing on the wall. Once again, the Babylonian diviners are confounded. The queen reminds Belshazzar of Daniel, who has "a spirit of the holy gods." Daniel is much less deferential to Belshazzar than he was to Nebuchadnezzar. He tells him to keep his gifts, and reminds him of the precedent of Nebuchadnezzar, who was humbled when he exalted himself. He upbraids Belshazzar more directly than he had ever done with his father, especially for desecrating the sacred vessels. He then deciphers the writing as "Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin." Originally, these words seem to have referred to coins of decreasing value. (Mene = the Greek *mna*, Tekel = shekel). The saying may have referred to

kings of declining worth. It probably characterized the last kings of Babylon, but it is not clear how they should be identified. Nebuchadnezzar was followed by Amel-Marduk (Evil-Merodach, 562-60; Neriglissar (560-556), Labashi-Marduk (very briefly, in 556 BCE, and Nabonidus 556-539). The Parsin may have referred to Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar, who shared power, but it is uncertain which kings would have been identified as the *mnas* and the *tekel*. In Daniel 5, however, the words are explained differently: “MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL: you have been weighed on the scales and found wanting; PARSIN: your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” The word MENE, which is repeated in the inscription, is only interpreted once. The words, then, are interpreted entirely as an oracle of judgment against Belshazzar. The king is given no time to repent. That very night he is killed and the kingdom passes to Darius the Mede.

The stories in Daniel 4 and 5 are not historical but they are moral tales about world kingship and life in the Diaspora. These are the stories that are most overtly critical of the Gentile kings. The lesson is that these kings prosper if they honor the true God and will be punished ruthlessly if they do not. No doubt, the fall of Babylon was very reassuring to the people of Judah, who had been humiliated and nearly exterminated by the Babylonians. The view that God acts in history to implement a moral code requires a selective reading of history. Gentile power might last a long time, but eventually all kingdoms pass away. This was the lesson of the understanding of history as a sequence of kingdoms. Only the kingdom of God would not pass away.

But while Jews might take comfort from the transience of Gentile power, the stories in Daniel 1-6 are in no hurry to see the end of Gentile rule. Belshazzar is the only one of these kings who is violently overthrown. He is succeeded, not by the final kingdom of God, but by Darius the Mede, who in turn is succeeded by Cyrus the Persian. The sequence of Gentile

kingdoms is divinely ordained and must run its course. Jews hope for a benign monarch, who respects their God, not for an end of Gentile rule. To be sure, Gentile rule will not last forever. Eventually, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will not pass away, but this is mentioned only in Daniel 2. Eschatology here is not imminent, but deferred. For the present, Jews have to negotiate life under foreign rule, by being loyal subjects of their overlords, so long as that loyalty does not conflict with the demands of their religion. The tales in Daniel 1-6 are written to reassure Jews living under foreign rule that this balance of commitments can be negotiated successfully, and that loyalty to their God will actually enhance their standing with the pagan rulers.

Questions for reflection

1. Compare Daniel's attitude to the pagan kings in the two chapters?
2. How do we understand Nebuchadnezzar's madness?
3. Compare and contrast the figures of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar?
4. Why is Daniel so unsympathetic and confrontational towards Belshazzar?
5. Are these stories subversive? Or basically supportive of Gentile rule?
6. Are there lessons of lasting value in these stories?

Further Reading

Collins, *Daniel*, 208-55;

Newsom, *Daniel*, 124-85;

Smth-Christopher, "The Book of Daniel," 68-85.