

The Book of Daniel Lesson 4

Chap 4 by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr

This chapter of Daniel is the fourth in a series of six court narratives from Daniel 1-6. Some have discovered some nine scenes in this passage, but we think a better analysis traces some five different scenes: (1) Nebuchadnezzar's proclamation and doxology (4: 1-3); (2) Content of the king's dream (4: 4-18); (3) Daniel's interpretation of the dream (4:19-27); (4) Fulfillment of the dream (4:28-33); and (5) Epilogue and doxology (4:34-37).

Characteristically, some of the older scholars found the unity of this chapter hard to believe, especially since it shifts from the first person in the first 18 verses, then moves to the third person in verses 19-33 and returns to the first person in verses 34-37. But to expect the description of the king's madness to be told in the first person by the king himself would be to expect a primary witness from an insane person.

This account is not dated in the Scriptures, but based on verse 30, as Nebuchadnezzar struts on the roof of his royal palace and admires all the work of his hands in the past, it would appear proper to say this event took place towards the close of his reign. This monarch ruled from approximately 605-562 B.C. for a 30-35 year reign. Therefore the events in this chapter must have come somewhere around 570 B.C., for two years prior to 570 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar ended his long siege of Tyre (Ezk 29:17-18). However, God gave to Nebuchadnezzar the gift of the land of Egypt, as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted (Jer 43:10; 44:29-30). A fragmentary tablet discovered by archaeologists says that it was in the 37th year of Nebuchadnezzar [which began about April 23, 568 B.C.] that Nebuchadnezzar marched against Egypt.[\[1\]](#) It would seem our chapter fits right into this time in history.

Nebuchadnezzar himself appears to add a moral to his own story after

he has been restored. It is this: "And those who walk in pride he [God] is able to humble" (v.37c). Surely such a conclusion is not far at all from what the Apostle James taught: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he shall lift you up" (Jam 4:10).

But the focal point or big idea of the text is the one that is repeated three times in this chapter: "The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men" (3:17, 25, 32). Therefore, while the mantra of our day is that our favorite sports team is "great" or that something else in the world is "great," this text, as illustrated through the life and experience of Nebuchadnezzar, teaches that "only God is great!"

OUTLINE:

Title: "Concluding That Only God Is Great!"

Text: Daniel 4:1-37

Focal point: vv. 17, 25, 32 "... The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."

Homiletical Keyword: "areas"

Interrogative: What are the areas in which God shows his greatness?

I. In All God's Actions (4:1-3)

- A. Addressed to All peoples, Nations and Languages
- B. Composed of His Signs and Miracles
- C. Demonstrated in the Eternality of His Kingdom

II. In God's Interruption of a Prosperous and Contended Life (4:3-18)

- A. An Easy Lifestyle
- B. A Troubling Dream
- C. A Messenger from Heaven

III. In God's Revelation of the Meaning of the Dream (4:19-27)

- A. The Tree is the King
- B. The Messenger is From Heaven
- C. He Calls for Change and Repentance by the King

IV. In God's Patience with the King (4:28-33)

- A. God Waited for Twelve Months for Repentance
- B. God Carried Out His Threat

V. In God's Restoration of the King's Senses (4:34-37)

- A. The King Looks to Heaven
- B. The King Glorifies God
- C. The King's Doxology

Conclusions

(STUDY OF TEXT BEGINS...)

I. In All God's Actions (4:1-3)

The narrative told in this chapter really begins back in 3:31-33. However, the chapter divisions made in the thirteenth century were adopted into the Latin Vulgate Version and used in the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint. This present chapter division is to be preferred over the Aramaic text chapter divisions, which Aramaic form failed to see the literary structure of ABBA, i.e. 4:1-3 (A), English text, matches 4:34-37 (A) which in turn contrasts with the two B forms in 4:4-18 and 4:19-33.

A. Addressed to All Peoples, Nations, and Languages

King Nebuchadnezzar begins this chapter by sending what appears to be an open letter to all who were "in all the world" as a sort of sovereign Aramaic Encyclical or Edict addressed to all peoples, all

nations and to every different language speaker. In this way, he also indicated the importance of what he had to say while also exhibiting a certain sense of his own authority and importance.

However, there was also a certain sense of humility about it as well, for the letter reflected negatively on his own demeanor and past haughtiness in his kingdom when placed over against the divine kingdom of the only true sovereign in the universe.

Previously in Daniel 3:4, the Babylonian king had addressed all the "peoples, nations and men of every language." But now he expanded that reference to all "who live in all the world" (4:1), which appeared to be a hyperbole for the full scope of Nebuchadnezzar's realm.

The salutation, "May you prosper greatly" (1c), or "Peace be multiplied to you!" is a rather typical greeting in Aramaic letters. However it is also found in some of the epistles of the Bible, e.g., 1 Peter 1:2 and 2 Peter 1:2.

B. Composed of God's Signs and Miracles

Nebuchadnezzar had already experienced enough of the work of God to have brought a change in his heart. The "signs and wonders" he referred to were not those the Israelites had experienced when God delivered them from Egypt. Instead, they were those wonderful miracles this Babylonian king had witnessed, such as the revelation and interpretation of the great image he had seen in Daniel 2, and the miraculous deliverance of the three men from the furnace. It is not that miracles were simply a thing of the past, for God was still showing his mighty power, even before the eyes of this gentile monarch. These miracles had been performed especially for Nebuchadnezzar and his nation.

C. Demonstrated in the Eternality of God's Kingdom

This Gentile king offers a doxology, both at the beginning of his story (v.3) and at its conclusion (v.35). His words are almost verbatim for those of Psalm 145:13, "Your kingdom is an everlasting

kingdom and your dominion endures through all generations.” However there is no evidence that he was aware of the Psalms or any of the other Scriptures of the Jewish people. But his praise for the eternal dominion of God certainly is on the main track of why this chapter was included in the Bible, even though it is mostly about the testimony that comes from a pagan king. This was in a way a “public confession” that Yahweh had an eternal rule and reign that superseded all other dominions and powers.

II. In God’s Interruption of a Prosperous and Contented Lifestyle (4:3-18)

A. An Easy Lifestyle

The king continued in the first person reporting and explaining how the circumstance of this dream arose. He was at home in his palace “at ease” and luxuriating in all he had accomplished. The two synonymous terms, “contented and prosperous” (4) formed one idea (a figure of speech called a *hendiadys*, i.e., “prosperous contentment”) for all his potential opponents had been reduced to submission, including Egypt; there were no real threats to his rule in all of the ancient Near East! That was indeed a great accomplishment, given the extent of his rule and the fact that he had none of the modern means of communication such as a telephone or cell phone, or weapons that could have instantaneously delivered destruction over hundreds of miles away as we have in the modern world.

B. A Troubling Dream

The only problem he had was a “dream that made [him] afraid” (v.5a). Many a monarch would have loved to exchange their list of worries for Nebuchadnezzar’s single problem: a dream! In that world and in those times, however, dreams experienced by a king could be very portentous indeed. Thus, the easy and carefree existence of this monarch was suddenly shattered by this dream. The king had to know what this dream meant.

Once again, the king turned to his class of wise men, including his “magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners” (v.7), who on a

previous occasion had failed him so miserably (Dan 2:2-3); they were nothing but charlatans and frauds. However, Daniel and his three friends had received scholarships to study with these so-called wise men, which must have made the rest of the class look either pretty good or really bad.

Disappointingly, these wise men were not able to solve the meaning of the dream, which in itself is amazing since they possessed (as we know from archaeology) tablets full of rules for interpreting of dreams of all sorts. Did they, perhaps, realize it was a negative meaning that would humiliate the king and therefore they held back? For some reason, they said they could not interpret this dream.

“Finally, Daniel came into my [the king’s] presence and I told him the dream” (v.8). Why Daniel was belatedly called, we do not know. Perhaps he was attending to other duties at the time. However, the king called Daniel “Belteshazzar, after the name of his god,” as he declared, “the spirit of the holy gods is in him” (v.8b-c). As Daniel listened to the king describe his dream (previously he had ordered his wise men to remind him what the contents of the dream were before they would tell him what it meant, Dan 2), Daniel was “greatly perplexed ... for a time and his thoughts terrified him” (v.19a-b).

The king had complete confidence in Daniel, for he said “no mystery is too difficult for you” (v.9c). Daniel had previously told the king that interpreting dreams was not a gift inherent in himself, but it came to him as a revelation from God (Dan 2:11).

Nebuchadnezzar then began to describe this dream that had so troubled him. As he watched, he said a tree stood in the middle of the land with a height that was so enormous that it was visible to the ends of the earth (vv.10-11). It had beautiful leaves and its fruit was so bountiful that it fed all, including every creature (v.12). The animals found shelter under it and the birds of the air lived in its branches (v.12).

C. A Messenger from Heaven

However, as the king watched, “a messenger, a holy one, [came] down

from heaven" (v.13) and ordered in a loud voice, "Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze" (vv.23 and vv.14-15). The hyperboles in this description are numerous: the height of the tree was unprecedented; its bulk was massive; with branches extending far enough to shelter all the animals and birds of the air; its leaves were healthy and beautiful, and its fruit was abundant. In fact, the Greek translation (LXX[21]) made this tree cosmic, for even the sun and the moon dwelt in its branches, but the Aramaic text did not support those readings.

Suddenly a "watcher" or "a holy one," which the LXX rendered as "an angel," appeared with orders to chop the tree down. Angels, of course, are not effeminate creatures with an impossible number of wings, but they are primarily God's messengers who perform God's will and carry out his word. As God's lieutenants, they restrain the Prince of the Power of the Air (or Satan) and are assigned to specific posts, such as the Prince of Persia, or the Prince of Greece. These angels attend church meetings and are most curious and desire to look into the redemption mortals experience as a result of Jesus' death on the cross (1 Pet 1:12).

But then abruptly, the messenger's declaration changed from referring to the action on the tree, with neuter pronouns such as "it," "its," to refer what was taking place in the tree, over to the masculine pronouns such as "him," and "his" in verses (vv.15c-16). This change is very much like the change that comes in the prophecy against Tyre in Ezekiel 26:12, where it referred by a masculine singular pronoun only to change abruptly to the masculine plural pronouns, indicating a switch from talking about Nebuchadnezzar to an event 200 years or more later that would come in Alexander the Great's day. It is this clue in this context, as in the Ezekiel reference, that tells us that the tree, as used here, was used figuratively.

Not only were the leaves stripped off this tree, but so was its fruit scattered and the animals and the birds deserted the sanctuary it had previously provided. Then the dream added, a male person was to be "drenched with the dew of heaven" (v.15c) and he was to live with the animals and the plants of the earth (v.15d). His mind would be

“changed from that of a man” to “the mind of an animal till seven times pass[ed] by for him” (v.16). This “verdict” was given for one set purpose: “that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men” (v.17). Those were the contents of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar.

III. In God’s Revelation of the Meaning of the Dream (4:19-27)

A. The Tree is the King

Daniel at first was bewildered by the dream (v.19a), but then he politely began to say, “If only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries” (v.19c). However, the truth was that Nebuchadnezzar was that tree (v.22). It was not aimed at the king’s enemies or his opponents, but the king himself, for he was that tree in the dream. Trees often were used in Scripture as symbols of rulers or their kingdoms. For example, the “shoot” from the cedar tree symbolized David’s royal house/dynasty (Ezk 17:22-24), or it symbolized Israel (Ezk19:10), just as Pharaoh was regarded as a cypress tree in Eden (Ezk 31:1-9). So that part of the dream had revelational roots.

Daniel had to have the same courage that the prophet Nathan required to tell David that he, David, was “that man” he had just described in his little story about how the rich man took the poor man’s one little sheep to sacrifice for a guest that had come to his palace (2 Sam 12:7). Nebuchadnezzar had “become great and strong” (v.22b). His “greatness had grown until it reached the sky, and [his] dominion extend[ed] to the distant parts of the earth” (v.22c-d). Indeed, the Aramaic word for “great” (tqp) appears six times in this passage (vv. 3, 11, 20, 22, 30). However, it will become clear to this king and all others that only God is great.

B. The Messenger is from Heaven

As for the “cutting down” of the tree announced by the messenger (v.24), Daniel avoided the additional words in verse 14 that spoke of trimming the tree’s branches, the stripping of its leaves, scattering

of its fruit, and the mind change that had been ordered for the male person the tree represented. But the essentials of the interpretation were just as clear: Nebuchadnezzar would be “driven away from people” and he would “live with wild animals” and “eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven” for “seven times” (v.25). The Aramaic word “times” (Aramaic `iddanin) appeared in Daniel 2:8; 3:5, 15; 4:16, 25; 7:25) and represented “years,” or as here, “seven years” (vv.16, 25). All this seems to be called for by God, since Nebuchadnezzar may have become cocky, proud, boastful, self-filled with himself, so that God had to bring him low, just as he is able to bring any person low who likewise begins to exalt himself over God (Prov 29:23).

Patiently God waited for any change in the king’s demeanor for “twelve months” (v.29). But on the very night when Nebuchadnezzar strutted on the roof of his palace, one of the seven wonders of the world, and claimed, “is this not the great Babylon I have built by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty” (v.30), God’s judgment swung into action while these very words were still on his lips (v.31).

There is no doubt that Babylon was an enormously wonderful city. It was the largest and finest city of the world in that day. It had some eight major gates, including the famous Ishtar Gate on its north side (now rebuilt in the Berlin Museum to half its original height). Its Processional Street ran 1000 yards long, decorated on either side with 120 lions and 575 dragons representing the gods Marduk and Bel. There were over 50 temples inside the city gates with the grand temple of Marduk at the end of the Processional Street along with the imposing ziggurat of Enemenanki. At that time the Euphrates River ran right through the city, dividing the city into east and west with a suspension bridge in the middle of the city measuring 30 feet wide and 600 feet in length, while ferries operated at the northern and southern end of the city. According to the Greeks, the Hanging Gardens of the Palace were one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Indeed, Babylon had an aura of splendor about it rarely seen in the ancient world.

A. Daniel Calls for a Change and for Repentance from the King

However, no fault could be attached to Daniel for his failure to do the work of missions or evangelism with this monarch. Good preacher that Daniel was, he pressed home the point that the king should “Renounce [his] sins” and “[his] wickedness” and “do what is right” (v.27). God had not only wanted full repentance, but he also wanted to see real evidence that the king had been changed inwardly in real repentance by the king’s outward marks of “being kind to the oppressed” and “do[ing] what was right.” Some have incorrectly taught on the basis of this verse in 4:27 that sins can be atoned for by good works and by giving alms to the poor, as the Apocryphal book Tobit urged (Tob. 12:9; 14:11; Ecclesiasticus [not: Ecclesiastes] 3:29-4:10). For example, the *Jerusalem Bible* rendered this passage unhelpfully by saying, “May it please the king to accept my advice: by virtuous actions break with your sins, break with your crimes by showing mercy to the poor and so live long and peacefully.” The 1970 *New American Bible*, otherwise often very well translated, rendered 4:27 as “Therefore, O king, take my advice: atone for your sins by good deeds, and for your misdeeds by kindness to the poor; then your prosperity will be long.” This translation is accompanied by a footnote that states boldly, “A classic Scripture text for the efficacy of good works.” This verse, however, was at the center of the controversy in the Reformation times as to whether merit could be earned towards one’s salvation by doing good works.

However, to translate the imperative “renounce” (Aramaic, peruq) as “atone/redeem” for your sins,” as the Latin and Greek translations did, is unwarranted, for this meaning never occurs in Aramaic or in the parallel Hebrew word until post-Biblical times. Moreover, the actual meaning of this word can be gained from the cognate Hebrew word in Exodus 32:2, where Aaron instructed those who wanted a visible god, “to tear away,” or “to break off” their golden ear rings so they could build the golden calf. The imagery is one of breaking, releasing, or snatching a yoke from the neck of an ox.

IV. In God’s Patience with the King (4:28-33)

A. God Waited Twelve Months for Repentance

Daniel's urgings went unheeded by this proud king. Therefore, the dream was fulfilled. Surely the lapse of an entire year before God acted in judgment speaks volumes for how long-suffering and patient God is, and that he is not willing that any should perish. Even as the king was in the very act of boasting about all he had accomplished, God brought about what he had warned would happen.

B. God Carried Out His Threat

His demise began with a "voice from heaven" (v.31). This voice is not identified in this text, but there can be little disagreement that it was a voice from God, or one that he authorized. But even more to the point, the time for Nebuchadnezzar's sovereignty and authority was to be suspended for a period of seven years, which had now begun (v.31c). He had brought on himself all this trouble because of his stubbornness to repent and turn towards God.

He was "driven away from [his] people" and he began to "live with the wild animals (v.32a). He now ate grass as his food and such would be his lifestyle until a full seven years had passed (v.32c). Only then would his senses be restored to him when he would "acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone [God] wishes" (v.32d).

V. In God's Restoration of the King's Senses (4:34-37)

A. The King Looks to Heaven

In this final section, as in the first three verses, the literary form returns to the first person narrative. This makes a fine inclusion or bracketing of the whole narrative.

Finally the king "raised [his] eyes toward heaven" (v.34a). Then his sanity was restored as he "praised the Most High" and "honored and glorified him who lives forever" (v.34c).

Even though the extant records of Babylon say nothing about this seven year hiatus in Nebuchadnezzar's reign (Near Eastern records rarely, if ever, noted their losses or any negative happenings), which absence in

the record is an argument from critics that want to rule this episode as being mythical, but that is an argument from silence and so should be treated in just that manner—with silence.

B. The King Glorifies God

The song of praise sung by this monarch reminds us of the words found in Psalm 145:13; 115:3; Isaiah 40:17; 44:27. Nebuchadnezzar exalted God, "because everything [God] does is right and [God's] ways are just" (v.37b).

Furthermore, he was restored to his throne once again and he enjoyed the honor and splendor he and his kingdom had enjoyed previously (v.36). His advisors and nobles sought him out once more and he possessed all that he had had before this sad event. He even warned others "that those who walk in pride [God] is able to humble" (v.37c).

Conclusions

1. God can bring down proud nations and leaders in our day just as he has done in the past.
2. We must not substitute the greatness of ourselves, our Churches, or our nations for God's greatness; he will not allow any competition with himself.
3. It is the Lord who is great and greatly to be praised (Psalm 48).
4. Let us take heed to ourselves and where we need to repent and to renounce our sins, let us do so.
5. We must say to ourselves and to the world: "Behold your God!"

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[1] James Pritchard, *Ancient Near East Texts* (3rd ed.) Princeton Univ.

Press, 1969, p.308.

[2] For LXX, see note in previous chapter.

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