

Daniel 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Daniel chapter 2. In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams. His spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king. And the king said to them, I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream. Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, O king, live forever.

Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation. The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, The word from me is firm. If you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation. They answered a second time and said, Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation. The king answered and said, I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm. If you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation. The Chaldeans answered the king and said, There is not a man on earth who can meet the king's demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh. Because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed, and they sought Daniel and his companions to kill them. Then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Ariok, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon. He declared to Ariok, the king's captain, Why is the decree of the king so urgent? Then Ariok made the matter known to Daniel, and Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king. Then Daniel went to his house, and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven. Daniel answered and said, Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and hidden things. He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter. Therefore Daniel went in to Ariok, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him, Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon. Bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation. Then Ariok brought in Daniel before the king in haste, and said thus to him, I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who will make known to the king the interpretation. The king declared to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen, and its interpretation? Daniel answered the king and said, No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.

Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these. To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind. You saw, O king, and behold, a great image, this image mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.

[4 : 56] Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold, all together were 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 image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation.

You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all, you are the head of gold. Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom, a bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. Like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as 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 firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay. And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people.

It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms, and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure. Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him. The king answered and 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. Then the king gave Daniel high honours and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. Daniel 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. In Daniel chapter 1, Daniel and his companions Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were tested. Through their faithfulness and not eating of the king's delicacies, they were set apart from their fellows, distinguishing themselves from others in their wisdom and understanding. In verse 17, Daniel in particular was noted for his ability in interpreting dreams and visions. This skill in interpreting dreams and visions, or an irromancy, seems to be something that Daniel had a recognised skill in, even before the events of chapter 2. Chapter 2 begins a section of the book that runs up to chapter 7.

Partway through verse 4, the book shifts from Hebrew to Aramaic, and it continues in Aramaic through to the end of chapter 7. We might observe, as many commentators have, a chiastic symmetry in these chapters. Chapters 2 and 7 deal with four empires. The first, the vision of the great statue, and the second, the vision of the four beasts. Chapters 3 and 6 present two tests of faithfulness.

[8 : 36] The three friends of Daniel and the fiery furnace in chapter 3, and the lion's den in chapter 6. In chapter 4, the proud king Nebuchadnezzar is humbled, and in chapter 5, the proud king Belshazzar is brought down, as in chapter 1 of the book. In chapter 2, there is a test that distinguishes Daniel from others, the test being the interpretation of the king's dream. Daniel once again is like Joseph.

He's the faithful man who rises through the ranks, he interprets the king's dream, and through his ascent to high office, prepares the way for his people to find refuge in a foreign Gentile land.

The events of this chapter occur in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Considering that the training of Daniel and his friends was supposed to last for three years, in chapter 1 verse 5, this dating does raise some questions. However, when we recognise that the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar most likely refers to the second full year of his reign, it makes more sense. Daniel's training would have begun in the accession year of Nebuchadnezzar, and then well into the second full year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar has his dream. Troubled by the unsettling dream that he has, Nebuchadnezzar summons the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and Chaldeans. However, Nebuchadnezzar will not disclose his dream to these persons. They are expected to inform him both of the content of his dream, and also of its interpretation. If they cannot do this, they will be torn limb from limb, and their houses will be demolished. But Nebuchadnezzar does offer a carrot to go with his stick. If they are able to tell him the dream and give him the interpretation of it, they will be showered with gifts and honour and rewards. Perhaps wondering whether Nebuchadnezzar is playing a cruel joke upon them, or whether he is indeed serious, the Chaldeans repeat their request that they be told the dream. But the king is not going to budge. If they cannot tell him his dream, they have condemned themselves. Quite dismayed by this point, the Chaldeans speak to the king again. He's asking something impossible of them. There's no one who can tell the king his dream. The expert astrologers, diviners, magicians, and sorcerers can at most interpret the dream.

They cannot disclose the contents of a dream that they themselves have not received. Only the gods can do that, and they don't dwell with men. The expert interpreters and diviners have to figure things out from the limited information that they have. What the king demands of them is entirely beyond their abilities and scope of competence. This episode seems to reveal a deep distrust between Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans. Nebuchadnezzar perhaps thinks that the Chaldeans are charlatans. They don't really have knowledge. They are just good at bluffing and making things up.

If they really had the deep knowledge, wisdom, and skills that would justify their influence in the Babylonian court, they would be able to perform the sort of feat that he is demanding of them here. [11 : 26] By their confession that they can't perform what is being asked of them, they are condemning themselves. The king therefore commands that they all be killed. Nebuchadnezzar seems to be radically re-evaluating the composition of his court. Despite his great power and his recent pivotal victories, this might portray a sort of insecurity at the heart of his regime. When the news of Nebuchadnezzar's decree reaches Daniel, who is included among the wise men, Daniel requires a stay of execution.

He is, he claims, able to show the interpretation of the dream to the king. As we've already noted, Daniel was already known for the interpretation of dreams and visions. This claim is not a complete bolt from the blue. In light of verse 24, Daniel's request of the king is probably not delivered to the king directly, but through Ariok. Having made this request, Daniel returns to his house, and he relates the matter to his three companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In the first chapter, he had spoken for all of them. In this chapter, he asked them to intercede for and with him. In the next chapter, they will be tested by themselves. Having prayed for knowledge of the mystery, Daniel receives a vision that night in which the dream of Nebuchadnezzar is revealed to him.

While we, as the hearers of this chapter, know that Daniel now knows the contents and the interpretation of the dream, neither of them have yet been revealed to us. The tension of the chapter is built up by a sort of poetic interlude. Within it, Daniel praises God for his revelation of mysteries. This break in the forward movement of the narrative heightens the tension. We're still waiting to hear what the dream means. It slows the pace of the chapter down, but most importantly, it reveals the message at the heart of the chapter about the Lord's uniqueness. The fact that the Lord is the true one who rules in the affairs of men. He alone is absolutely sovereign. This will be manifested in the interpretation of the dream, but it's also seen in the way that the Lord reveals this. Seen against the backdrop of the Chaldeans' claim that disclosing such a dream was impossible, the Lord's revelation of the contents of Nebuchadnezzar's dream to Daniel is a manifestation of his power and sovereignty. Furthermore, it's a sign that, in contrast to the gods that the Chaldeans believed in, the Lord is active and involved in and speaks into the affairs of men. Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, might remind us of the figure of Potiphar, who occupied a similar position in the regime of Joseph's pharaoh. Arioch speaks for Daniel to the king. Paul Tanner suggests that Arioch was a glory grabber, attempting to gain extra favour for himself with the king by bringing Daniel to

him. However, we should consider the risk that Arioch is taking at this time. If Daniel fails to disclose and interpret the king's dream, he too would be put dangerously out of favour with the king. He's likely putting his neck out for Daniel at this point. Already in chapter 1, we saw that Daniel gained favour with key figures in the court. And here again, it seems, as in the case of Joseph, that the Lord giving favour to Daniel in the sight of others enables him to come before the king to save his life and to save also the lives of the wise man. Daniel has two names. His Hebrew name is Daniel, presumably the name that he received at his birth. However, the chief of the eunuchs in chapter 1 gave him the name Belteshazzar. Here we are told once again that Daniel's name was Belteshazzar.

[14 : 48] James Jordan has suggested that these names are not used interchangeably. Rather, the name Daniel highlights the fact that Daniel is the servant of God. Belteshazzar, that he is the servant of the king. To the king's question whether he is indeed able to disclose and interpret the dream, Daniel's initial response is rather unpromising. He starts by accentuating the negative. No wise men, enchanters, magicians or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked. One can imagine the king becoming quite angry, wondering whether Daniel is merely wasting his time. However, Daniel's statement of what is impossible with man is calculated to set things up for a confession of the power of God.

The true God, the God of heaven, is revealing mysteries to the king, in particular what will happen in the latter days. The latter days here are a reference not to the final days of all history, but rather to the latter days of the old covenant administration. Daniel begins to recount the dream, but not before making another confession of the Lord's part in revealing the truth to him.

Daniel is a renowned diviner, an interpreter of dreams and visions, but it is not on account of his superior skill that he is able to reveal the meaning of this dream to the king. Rather, his recounting and interpretation of the dream will be an authenticating witness for the king.

The fact that King Nebuchadnezzar has the dream, and Daniel also receives the knowledge of the dream, also provide two distinct witnesses to this revelation, to make it more sure in our minds too. The images of a great, terrifying and lofty statue. We might again think of the Babel themes that are playing out in this book. The reference to the land of Shinar back in chapter 1 alluded to Genesis chapter 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel and its builders. They were attempting to build a great empire that gathered together all the peoples of the world in one, and also to join together heaven and earth with a great tower. As we shall see, this statue seems to be motivated by a similar ambition. The image is described historically moving down from the head towards the feet.

[16 : 52] Perhaps we're supposed to see this as a sort of descent from heaven to earth. The movement is from precious metals down. Gold is the most precious metal, silver next, bronze next, and then iron after that. That iron is then admixed with clay at the very bottom. As a movement from precious metals down, it might be compared to the temple, which moves from gold in the most holy places, to silver for some of the brackets of the tabernacle for instance, to bronze in the courtyard, and then to iron for the gates.

James Jordan suggests that this statue might be a sort of humaniform temple. In addition to that progression, there's a movement into greater hardness. From gold to silver to bronze to iron may seem like a decrease in glory, but it's an increase in might. It's also a movement of metals into more useful and powerful metals. You can do far more with iron than you can with gold. Furthermore, it's an image of extension. Gold and silver are rare, bronze and iron are not as rare, and clay is extremely common.

This could be seen as an extension out into the world. The statue is trying to gather up all the materials of the world to become comprehensive in its composition. It's a movement into alloyed and then finally add mixed materials. It starts off with the purity of gold and silver, then has the alloy of bronze, and then moves into this brittle mixture of clay and iron. It's a single composite statue. The statue starts at the top and moves down, cumulatively working through the different kingdoms. Perhaps when Satan brought Christ up on a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of earth at a glance, he was showing him something like this, a great visual symbol of the unity of successive empires over time, each empire taking on characteristics and continuing something of the life of its predecessors.

Peter Lighthouse suggests that we might also take note of the movement into greater diversity within the statue itself. The great head has a unity, whereas the chest and arms have two sides.

[18 : 53] Likewise, the middle and the thighs have different parts to them. The legs of iron end in feet with ten toes. Most commentators note the literary connections between chapter 2 and chapter 7, and the way that the vision of the four beasts in chapter 7 might help us to interpret this vision in chapter 2. Chapter 7 verses 3 to 7 read as follows.

And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. The first was like a lion and had eagle's wings. Then as I looked, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. And behold, another beast, a second one like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth, and it was told, Arise, devour much flesh. After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth. It devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns.

The final beast seems to connect with the bottom of the statue. It has feet, it's connected with iron, and its ten horns seem to connect with the ten toes. The vision then seems to speak of four successive empires as a unity. God has given Nebuchadnezzar the kingdom, and he is establishing in Nebuchadnezzar and these successive empires a great and powerful structure that he will later overthrow. This great human image is given a sort of Adamic, comprehensive dominion over the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens. Different theories have been advanced for the identity of these different kingdoms or empires. Typically liberal scholars have identified these empires as Babylon, Media, Persia, and then Greece. While there is some variation on the point, generally conservative scholars have identified these empires as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and then Rome, Medo-Persia being counted as a single empire rather than two successive ones. Ernest Lucas, in his commentary, challenges this conservative interpretation. The Seleucids and Ptolemy's were mixed in marriage, which led to the weakness of the kingdom, which he argues is connected with the fourth beast and with the feet of this great image. He argues that the small horn that arises in chapter 8 would have to be distinguished from the horn in chapter 7. For more liberal commentators, there's also the problem of predictive prophecy. If you don't believe that divine prophecy concerning the future exists, then clearly the book of Daniel is going to present some problems and parts. James Jordan interprets the two-horned ram with the horn that becomes larger as Medo-Persia, and the goat is identified as Greece in chapter 8 verse 21. This would seem to resolve at least one of Lucas's concerns.

As Tanner points out, there is no distinct empire of Media that followed Babylon. The empire was given to the Medes and the Persians in chapter 5 verse 28, and it is the laws of the Medes and the Persians that are described in chapter 6 verse 8. The description of the destruction of the image might remind us of the description of the destruction of the wicked in Psalm 1 verses 4 to 5. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. One of the great questions concerning the meaning of this dream is what ends at the time of the downfall of the statue, particularly if we see the feat referring to the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire continues to be a thing well into the 5th century AD. This would seem to present problems for interpretations that see the stone growing into the mountain as a description of Christ and the growth of his kingdom. Over four centuries after the death and resurrection and ascension of Christ, the Roman Empire is still there.

[22 : 50] Rather, it seems to me that we need to understand these things from their spiritual aspect. These great successive empires play a role prior to the ascension of Christ that they do not do afterwards. The God of heaven gives the kingdom, the power, the might and the glory not to Nebuchadnezzar and his successors, but to Christ and his kingdom. The Roman Empire may continue to be on earth, but it has been stripped of the spiritual role that it once played within the world.

The mantle of the great cosmic kingdom has been laid on another's shoulders, and even before it has risen in its height, this shift has decisively occurred. Later in the book of Daniel, Daniel will receive a vision in which he sees a sort of metallic man, which I think we should identify with the great angel of the covenant, with Michael, with the second person of the Trinity. Daniel chapter 10 verses 4 to 6.

On the 24th day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, that is the Tigris, I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphras around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. This figure is the true metal man who will take the place of this former statue. The gradual growth of the stone into the mountain might remind us of passages like Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 3. It shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it. And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Behind the image of the stone toppling the giant statue, we might see David and Goliath. Now another stone of David, the stone of the Messiah, is going to topple another giant, this giant statue that represents all the empires of the world. As an uncut stone, it would also be associated with the altar, which was formed of uncut stones. Altars were associated with mountains, a place of communion with God, of raising up the earth to God's presence. Cut from the mountain might also remind us of the tablets of stone of the law that the Lord himself originally cut. Most importantly, the mountain that fills the earth is an image of comprehensiveness. It joins heaven to earth in its height, and it unites the whole world in its scope. The four corners of the altar represent the four corners of the world, and the four winds of heaven. Here the great mountain is a similar image of comprehensiveness. Jesus refers similar imagery to himself in Matthew chapter 21 verses 42 to 44, relating the image of the stone with the foundation of a temple. Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the scriptures, the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone? This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. With the king's dream, and Daniel's disclosure of the dream and its interpretation, the dream is made certain. It will surely come to pass. Nebuchadnezzar falls on his face in response.

Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold falling on his face represents in his individual person the later toppling of the great statue itself. Through the Lord's demonstration of his sovereignty, through the revelation of the dream and its interpretation to Daniel, he made known his power to Nebuchadnezzar too. Nebuchadnezzar, rewarding Daniel as he had promised, lifts him up and makes him the ruler of all the province of Babylon, and chief among Babylon's wise men. At Daniel's request, the king also raises up Daniel's three companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, here referred to as Shadrach, Meshach, and Bednego, their Babylonian names. A question to consider, the great metallic statue, gold, silver, bronze, iron, and mixed with clay, was finally brought down with an uncut stone. Juxtaposed with the other materials, what significance might we find in the uncut stone?