

Daniel 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 25 June 2021

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[0 : 00] Daniel chapter 4. King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations and languages that dwell in all the earth, peace be multiplied to you. It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs! How mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation. I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed, the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me.

So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation.

At last Daniel came in before me, he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my God, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. And I told him the dream, saying, O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and that no mystery is too difficult for you. Tell me the visions of my dream that I saw, and their interpretation. The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these.

I saw and behold a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all.

[1 : 34] The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. I saw in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and behold, a watcher, a holy one, came down from heaven. He proclaimed aloud, and said thus, Chop down the tree, and lop off its branches. Strip off its leaves, and scatter its fruit.

Let the beasts flee from under it, and the birds from its branches. But leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze, amid the tender grass of the field.

Let him be wet with the dew of heaven. Let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth. Let his mind be changed from a man's, and let a beast's mind be given to him. And let seven periods of time pass over him. The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men. This dream I, King Nebuchadnezzar, saw, and you, O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation, because all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known to me the interpretation. But you are able, for the spirit of the holy gods is in you. Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you. Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies. The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth, whose leaves were beautiful, and its fruit abundant, and in which was food for all, under which beasts of the field found shade, and in whose branches the birds of the heavens lived. It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong. Your greatness has grown and reaches to heaven, and your dominion to the ends of the earth. And because the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven, and saying, Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump of its roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze in the tender grass of the field, and let him be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts of the field, till seven periods of time pass over him. This is the interpretation, O king. It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my

Lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that heaven rules. Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you. Break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity. All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months, he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. And the king answered and said, Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence, and for the glory of my majesty? While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven.

[5 : 08] O king Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken. The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of man, and gives it to whom he will. Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws.

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives forever. For his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the hosts of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth. And none can stay his hand, or say to him, what have you done? At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom my majesty and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and my lord sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, for all his works are right, and his ways are just, and those who walk in pride, he is able to humble. Daniel chapter 4 continues the Aramaic section of the book that runs from chapter 2 to chapter 7. This section has a book-ended structure with chapter 2 paralleled with chapter 7, 3 with 6, and then 4 with 5. Chapter 4 and 5 both deal with the humbling and proud kings.

20th century biblical scholars have noted the similarity between the story of chapter 4, and the prayer of Nabonidus, a text from the Dead Sea Scrolls. John Collins translates the relevant section as follows. The words of the prayer which Nabonidus, king of Babylon, the great king, prayed when he was smitten with a bad disease by the decree of God in Temer. I, Nabonidus, with a bad disease, was smitten for seven years, and since God set his face on me, he healed me, and as for my sin, he remitted it. A diviner, he was a Jew from among the exiles, came to me and said, proclaim and write to give honour and exaltation to the name of God Most High, and I wrote as follows.

I was smitten by a bad disease in Temer, by the decree of the Most High God. For seven years I was praying to the gods of silver and gold, bronze, iron, wood, stone, clay, since I thought that they were gods. The text is fragmentary and it picks up again later. I was made strong again. The peace of my repose returned to me. Andrew Stymond makes the case that the prayer of Nabonidus text is dependent upon Daniel chapter 4. It is not an actual historical account, but is designed to fill the gap between the known activities of Daniel during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and the later years of the empire of Babylon, during which time we also have records of Daniel's dealings. Much of the chapter takes the form of Nebuchadnezzar's first person testimony. Nebuchadnezzar bears a remarkable witness to what has happened to him, and the story is filled out by the narrator. The affirmation of the Lord's everlasting kingdom should be read against the backdrop of chapters 2 and 3, where Nebuchadnezzar's intention that his kingdom would endure forever is frustrated by the Lord. Language such as that of verse 3, how great are his signs, how mighty his wonders, evokes the story of the exodus. In that story, the stubborn heart of a king resisted the purpose of the Lord, and Pharaoh and the might of Egypt were humbled through the ten plagues and the defeat at the Red Sea. As in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a troubling dream. In order to interpret the dream, he summons the magicians, enchanters,

Chaldeans and astrologers. The tensions and the ill will that seem to exist between the king and the Chaldeans back in chapter 2 do not seem to be a factor here. We might speculate as to why Daniel is not invited to interpret the dream, and why the king makes known the content of his dream to the Chaldeans, magicians, enchanters and astrologers. Does he no longer doubt their powers of interpretation?

[9 : 30] The absence of Daniel, the truly gifted interpreter of dreams, and the presence of these Chaldeans, whose abilities are suspect, perhaps suggests that the king wants a flattering interpretation.

The interpretation of such a dream is designed in part to explain how to avert the crisis the dream foretells, and Daniel, for all of his ability to interpret the dream, did not provide much help on that front back in chapter 2. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that Nebuchadnezzar's relationship to Daniel at this point might be similar to that between King Ahab and the prophet Micaiah back in 1 Kings chapter 22. Micaiah, though known by the king to be a faithful prophet of the Lord, is shunned because he does not give the flattering prophecies that the king wants to hear. However, those who are first summoned are not able to interpret the dream, and so Daniel, otherwise known as Beltshazzar, is also summoned. He's addressed as the chief of the magicians. He was set over them back in chapter 2.

In Genesis chapter 41 verse 38, Pharaoh said to his servants, Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God, speaking of Joseph? Here Daniel is described in a similar way to Joseph. We should notice the continuing theme in the book of Daniel of the struggle of interpretation. It's in chapter 2 with the king's first dream. It's here in chapter 4 with the second dream. It's in chapter 5 with the writing on the wall. Later on in the book, the theme of interpretation continues in relation to the visions that Daniel receives from the Lord. The struggle of kings to interpret, the changing of the language of the book itself from Hebrew to Aramaic, might be a further way in which the book evokes the themes of the story of Babel. Language is being confused.

People are struggling to interpret. Even in this chapter, there may be an element of wordplay in the changing of the king's heart. As James Joyce recognised in his book *Finnegan's Wake*, in the lines, and shall not Babel be with Lebab? And he wore. Babel is the Hebrew and Aramaic word for heart spelled backwards. The theme of Babel pervades the opening chapters of Daniel. It will continue into chapter 5 with the confusing writing on the wall and the overturning of this new kingdom of Babel, Babylon. The Babelic heart of the king in this chapter is changed and a true heart will be placed within him. While this is rather speculative, there might be something along these lines taking place here. In contrast to chapter 2, the king here relates his dream to Daniel. It concerns a great tree in the midst of the earth. In chapter 2, there was a towering image. In chapter 3, there was a great image that was set up in the plain of Jura. Here, there is another thing reaching up to heaven. This time, it's a great tree. A cosmic tree to go with the cosmic mountain at the end of chapter 2, perhaps. As the tower of Babel had sought, the top of this tree reaches to heaven. It's visible to the ends of the whole earth. It gathers together all the ends of the earth in its view, and it also gathers together heaven and earth as its top reaches heaven. It provides food, shelter, and shade to all around. The beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens represent different peoples and nations that take refuge in the kingdom of

Babylon. The image of kingdoms and empires as great trees is not exclusive to the Bible. It's also found in Babylonian texts. Elsewhere in scripture, we can see it in places like Ezekiel chapter 31, verses 1 to 11. In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me. Son of man, say to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and to his multitude, whom are you like in your greatness? Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade, and of towering height, its top among the clouds. The waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall, making its rivers flow around the place of its planting, sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field. So it towered high above all the trees of the field.

[13 : 29] Its boughs grew large, and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots. All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs. Under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young, and under its shadow lived all great nations. It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches, for its roots went down to abundant waters. The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees eke its boughs. Neither were the plain trees like its branches. No tree in the garden of God was its eke in beauty. I made it beautiful in the mass of its branches, and all the trees of Eden envied it, that were in the garden of God. Therefore thus

says the Lord God, because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it, as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. Having witnessed this great tree, the cosmic tree, Nebuchadnezzar then sees a watcher coming down from heaven. He declares a sentence against the tree.

It must be cut down, its branches lopped off, its leaves stripped off, and its fruit scattered. Its stump should be left, but it would be bound with a band of iron and bronze.

At this point, the imagery seems to shift from a tree, or a stump of a tree, to a person. He is cast out and put among the beasts, wet with the dew of heaven. His mind is changed for that of a beast, and seven periods of time pass over him. The watchers here mentioned are most likely angels, angelic figures who watched over nations. At various parts of the Old Testament, we read of these figures. We might think of the visitors that went to Sodom to inspect it, or perhaps more relevant in this instance, those who went down to judge Babel and its builders. While Israel was the Lord's special inheritance, and he ruled over Israel more directly, the other nations were given to angelic rule. Perhaps we're supposed to see in these figures of the watchers that angelic rule in practice. They participate in the counsel of the Lord, and they declare this sentence that is passed upon Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom. The purpose of the sentence is so that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men. The importance of the humility of great rulers is seen at various points in the Old Testament. We might think of the law of the king in Deuteronomy chapter 17 verses 19 to 20. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by keeping all the words of this law, and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel. In Numbers chapter 12, when his leadership is challenged by Aaron and Miriam, Moses is declared to be the meekest of the men of the earth. It is precisely his meekness that qualifies him to be a good leader. If he were not so meek, the great revelation that he had received would have lifted up his heart in pride. Understood like this, being lowly in heart is one of the things that qualifies rulers for their office. As the Lord will humble Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter, he is preparing him to exercise a more effective and righteous rule. Hearing the dream and perceiving its interpretation, Daniel is dismayed. As Belteshazzar, he is a loyal servant of King Nebuchadnezzar. He does not want to see Nebuchadnezzar brought down. Nebuchadnezzar is even a source of safety and security for the Jews within the land of Babylon. He has been good to Daniel and his three friends, lifting them up to high office. He has even confessed the sovereignty of the Lord, and made decrees that would provide some religious freedom for the Jews within the land.

[17:16] Daniel makes the key identification. The tree is Nebuchadnezzar himself. The sentence of the watchers, here also described as a decree of the Most High, is a humbling of King Nebuchadnezzar.

As we see in places like Psalm 8, the raising up of human beings to sovereignty over nations is a remarkable thing. It's a sign of the great dominion the Lord has given to humanity.

Man is made a little lower than the angels and placed over all of the beasts. In the book of Daniel, the angels will come into greater focus. Angelic figures like the Prince of Persia exercise authority over kingdoms, and human rulers like Nebuchadnezzar are under these greater powers.

James Bajon has suggested a similarity between Nebuchadnezzar and Cain. Cain is driven away from other men and is connected with the number seven. The Lord will avenge Cain sevenfold on anyone who attacks him. The judgment upon Nebuchadnezzar and his pride might also recall the judgment that is made upon the serpent in Genesis chapter 3. Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field. On your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. The serpent is exiled and humbled on account of his pride. He is brought down, and he has to eat the dust as food. Here Nebuchadnezzar is brought to eat food from the ground also, eating grass like an ox. However, in being wet with the dew of heaven, there may be some sign of hope.

I think we might be justified in seeing some baptismal imagery here. The Lord's intent is not to cut off Nebuchadnezzar entirely. His kingdom will be preserved for him, and it will be restored to him.

[18 : 52] Daniel concludes by giving some urgent counsel to Nebuchadnezzar. There is the possibility of averting this terrible judgment. If he cuts off his sins and shows mercy to the oppressed, the Lord may have mercy on him and not judge him as he is warned. We might well ask why God has given Nebuchadnezzar this dream, if there is no hope of a positive response from him. However, Nebuchadnezzar is not able to avert it. Twelve months later, he is walking on the roof of the royal palace in Babylon.

This might remind us of the story of David and Bathsheba, where David's sin concerning Uriah and Bathsheba began with him looking out from the roof of the royal palace. Looking out over great Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar's heart is lifted up in pride. At that very moment, God's judgment takes effect.

A voice comes from heaven and declares that the kingdom has departed from him. He is expelled from among men and has to live among the animals. The seven periods of time might be seven years, or perhaps only seven months. James Jordan suggests that as it references twelve months in verse 29, it might be more likely that it is seven months for the period of the judgment.

Peter Lighthouse suggested that the description of what befalls Nebuchadnezzar might make us think of the cherubim. The cherubim, or the living creatures, in Ezekiel chapter 1, have four faces, an ox, a lion, an eagle, and a man. Here, Nebuchadnezzar is made to eat grass like an ox. His hair, in a very strange description, is described as growing as long as eagle's feathers, and his nails like bird's claws.

In Ezekiel chapter 17, two eagles represent Babylon and Egypt. In verse 3 of that chapter, say thus says the Lord God, a great eagle with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colours, came to Lebanon and took the top of the cedar. In chapter 7 verse 4, similar cherubic imagery is used concerning the Babylonian beast. The first was like a lion and had eagle's wings.

[20 : 47] 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. Through the humbling of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon is being raised up as a glorified cherubic guardian empire. In the cutting off of the nails and the cutting off of the hair, James Jordan has suggested that we might find some background in the law of the Nazarite. Perhaps there is also some in the law concerning those infected with leprosy, in Leviticus chapter 14 verses 1 to 9. In that law, the person is purified, being removed from the areas of human habitation for a period of time. They are cleansed over a period of seven days with seven sprinklings. At the end of that period of days, the person being cleansed must remove all of the hair from their body, the hair of their head, their beard, their eyebrows, all other hair.

Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar is being cleansed from being struck by the Lord in a similar way. His restoration comes as he lifts up his eyes to heaven. At that point, his reason returns to him, and his first response is to praise and honour the Lord. Throughout the book of Daniel, the question of who has the dominion, who it is who really orders the affairs of men, is the dominant and driving question. And at the end of this chapter, in another great confession of the Lord's sovereignty, Nebuchadnezzar goes farther than he ever has before. He recognises the Lord's sovereignty, not just in being able to disclose dreams and visions, not just in being able to deliver his servants from the fire, but also in his sovereignty over the heart of the king. All of the signs point towards Nebuchadnezzar having a sort of conversion at this point. This proud king's confession of the Lord's sovereignty is truly remarkable. Now he is lifted up again, and the heart of a man is given to him as the beast of chapter 7 verse 4. He enjoys far greater sovereignty and rule than he ever did beforehand. A question to consider. Some New Testament scholars have argued for an echo of the story of Nebuchadnezzar in the story of Jesus' baptism, particularly as recorded by Mark's gospel. Do you believe that such an echo exists? If you do, what theological purpose might it be serving in its context?