

Daniel 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Daniel chapter 6. It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom 120 satraps to be throughout the whole kingdom, and over them three high officials, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him.

Then these men said, We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel, unless we find it in connection with the law of his God. Then these high officials and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, O king Darius, live forever. All the high officials of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors, are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked. Therefore king Darius signed the document and injunction.

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber, open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. Then they came near and said before the king, concerning the injunction, O king, did you not sign an injunction, that anyone who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions? The king answered and said, The thing stands fast according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.

Then they answered and said before the king, Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or the injunction you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day. Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed, and set his mind to deliver Daniel, and he laboured till the sun went down to rescue him. Then these men came by agreement to the king and said to the king, Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed. Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king declared to Daniel, May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you. And a 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, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting. No diversions were brought to him.

And sleep fled from him. Then at break of day the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions? Then Daniel said to the king, O king, live forever. My God sent his angel, and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him.

[3 : 41] And also before you, O king, I have done no harm. Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken 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. And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel, were brought and cast into the den of lions, they, their children, and their wives.

And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them, and broke all their bones in pieces. Then king Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth, Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree that in all my royal dominion, people are to 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 shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues. He works signs and wonders, in heaven and on earth. He who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions. So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius, and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. Daniel chapter 6 is the penultimate chapter of the Aramaic section of the book. As we've already noted, the Aramaic chapters, chapters 2 to 7, have a chiasmic or book-ended pattern, which can help us to get a firmer grip upon their more particular and their overarching themes. Chapter 2, the first dream of Nebuchadnezzar parallels with chapter 7, the four beasts mapping onto the four parts of the image. Chapters 4 and 5 both concern the humbling experienced by two contrasted kings, and chapters 3 and 6, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, and Daniel in the lion's den, both involve idolatrous decrees resisted by faithful Jews, who were then miraculously delivered from a death sentence. Chapter 6 begins and ends with a decree. The first decree is an idolatrous decree, and the second decree a decree honoring the Lord and his sovereignty. Although themes of Babel are not now prominent in the ways that they were during the period of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in chapters 1 to 5, the theme of the competing sovereignty of the Lord and human rulers continues to drive the narrative in this, the final narrative chapter of the book. It's important to appreciate that the book of Daniel isn't merely dealing with the specific events that befell Daniel and his friends, but raises more generalizable issues of the relationship between the rule and sovereignty of the Lord and those of great human empires, something that will be represented in visionary form in the chapter that follows. The pretensions of empire, whether expressed in the hubris of egotistical kings like Nebuchadnezzar, or in the divinised legal systems of the Medes and the Persians, are no match for the rule of the creator god. At the end of chapter 5, Darius was said to receive the kingdom at the age of 62. That we have the age of a pagan king given in such a manner is itself very strange, especially as it is seemingly entirely incidental to the narrative. It doesn't serve as a chronological reference point, for instance. This raises the possibility that the number was recorded for us less for the narrow purposes of historical record than for the purpose of highlighting matters of symbolic significance. As we previously saw, Darius' age suggests that he represents a new balance, as his age corresponds to a particular rendering of the weight in shekels of the weights of the handwriting on the wall. One minor worth 60 shekels, one shekel, and two half-weights, in this case taken as two half-shekels, 62 shekels in total. We can go further though. In chapter 9 verses 24 to 27, Daniel receives a revelation in the context of his reflections concerning the completion of the 70 years foretold for the desolations of Jerusalem by the prophet Jeremiah. Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore, and understand that from the going out of the word, to restore and build Jerusalem, to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince, who is to come, shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed, and he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week. And for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abomination shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator. The fact that the very specific number sixty-two, a number that only appears once in scripture outside of the book of Daniel, in 1 Chronicles chapter 26 verse 8, with no apparent significance in that context, appears twice in a few chapters, seems to be quite noteworthy. It raises the possibility that we ought to read the events of chapter 6, as a preview of the 70th week of the prophecy of chapter 9, and perhaps also as a microcosmic representation of the 70th year of the desolations of Jerusalem under Babylon that it magnifies.

[9 : 05] I believe that attempting to read chapter 6 in light of this proves fruitful and illuminating. Before we enter into a consideration of the substance of the passage, it's important to consider the figure of Darius, whose identity is a cause of considerable debate among commentators.

Indeed, the figure of Darius is one of the reasons why perhaps a majority of academic commentators consider the book of Daniel to be a much later work of historical fiction, rather than

as a historical account faithful to the actual events. While we won't settle the questions surrounding his identity here, it's worth taking the time to reflect upon the various pieces of evidence and other considerations that must factor into our determination of Darius' identity, along with some of the chief identifications that have been advanced. To begin with, there are a number of pieces of biblical evidence that need to be considered. Darius is identified as being a Mede by descent in chapter 9 verse 1 as the son of Ahasuerus, representing the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians. Second, Darius is 62 years old when he receives the kingdom. Third, we have chapter 6 verse 28, so this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. This verse could be read either as referring to Darius and Cyrus as two successive kings, in whose reigns

Daniel served, or as an identification of the two figures, during the reign of Darius the Mede, who was the same figure as Cyrus the Persian. Alternatively, perhaps Darius could be understood as a vice-guerrant or co-regent of Cyrus, or vice versa. Fourth, Darius clearly enjoyed considerable authority. He claims the prerogative to address all peoples, and he establishes a regime overseen by 120 satraps. Fifth, we need to square the character of Darius as seen in this chapter with whatever character with which we choose to identify him. We might also need to account for Darius' seemingly deep attachment to Daniel revealed in this chapter, which might be a little surprising if they have only recently become acquainted, and just for a short period of time. Sixth, there is the evidence in biblical prophecy that suggests that the Median kingdom initially enjoyed a greater prominence in the Medo-Persian empire before the Persians became dominant, and furthermore, that it was the Medes in particular that overthrew Babylon. Jeremiah chapter 51 verse 11 reads, Sharpen the arrows, take up the shields. The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance for his temple. Verse 58 of the same chapter, Prepare the nations for war against her, the kings of the Medes, with their governors and deputies, and every land under their dominion. Similarly, in Isaiah chapter 13 verses 17 to 19, Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. Their bows will slaughter the young men, they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb, their eyes will not pity children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. In the book of Daniel, as James Bajan remarks, there is a notable shift from a Median prominence in the Medo-Persian empire to a Persian hegemony. In Daniel to this point, the Medes have been listed first. The rise of the Persians to dominance in the empire is seen in the raising up of the bear-like beast on one of its two sides, in chapter 7 verse 5. In chapter 8 verse 3, the Medo-Persian empire is represented in a ram with two horns, with one later gaining primacy over the other, representing the Persians. Later on in the prophecy of Daniel, Persia is spoken of by itself without reference to the Medes, perhaps suggesting that a Persian hegemony within the empire would be established quite soon. Finally, there is the apparent great significance that the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede had for Daniel, connected with the fulfilment of prophecy concerning the end of Israel's captivity, an event which was, in 2 Chronicles chapter 36 verses 20 to 23, connected with the time of the establishment of the kingdom of Persia. These elements of the biblical account, however, conflict with the picture that most historians have drawn from the various evidence that we have from other sources. For many of the relevant sources, there is no record of such a Median king taking over Babylon. There is a later King Darius, a successor to Cyrus the Great, mentioned in the context of the rebuilding of the temple, but he is described as a Persian and comes some time afterward. Andrew Steinman, in his treatment of the question, notes that some sceptical scholars have speculated that the story of chapter 6 was a fictional one, originally set in the reign of Darius the Great of Persia, later incorporated into the book of Daniel, with the king being reimagined as an invented king that was designed in part to fulfil the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah concerning the Medes' overthrow of Babylon.

[14:00] Before venturing further into the details of the question, it is important to bear in mind the danger of overconfident pronouncements on such historical questions. Belshazzar was long declared to be a figment of later historical imagination, rather than an actual historical figure, before evidence surfaced vindicating the biblical account in its assertion of his historicity. There are many ways in which the discovery of new evidence could change the picture that we have of this period. Many of the reconstructions are fairly tentative on certain points. We also need to bear in mind the fact that dominant interpretations of the existing evidence can themselves be very contestable. Some of it, for instance, in this case derives from propagandist accounts given by kings of the

scope of their own power, and should be taken with a generous helping of salt. Furthermore, it's important to recognise that the biblical texts themselves are key historical evidence, not merely dubious accounts that must be granted no weight beyond what can be corroborated by other sources. The fact that the reliability of the text on certain points has been vindicated against previous consensus among scholars, for instance, should encourage us to insist that more weight be placed upon the evidence that the text provides for things that cannot yet be corroborated when we deal with non-Christian or liberal scholars.

Other scholars have attempted to identify Darius the Mede with other known characters of history. Gubaru, the general of the Persian army that conquered Babylon in 539 BC, who then became its governor, or perhaps vassal king, has been one popular historical contender. However, Gubaru's period of office was under a month, far too short for all of the events associated with it in the book of Daniel.

Gubaru would need to have had time to appoint 120 satraps, for Daniel to stand out to him from the other high officials, and to establish the law concerning the 30 days of exclusive intermediation. This is not to mention all of the other things that Daniel and others did during this period. As Steinman argues, it strains credulity that all of this occurred in a single month. Besides this, as a mere governor or vassal king, Gubaru would not seem to have enjoyed the sort of authority that Darius claimed to exercise in this chapter. Another possible and ancient identification is of Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. The identification would read chapter 6 verse 28 as speaking of them as the same figure, rather than as two successive kings. The theory, based in part on the histories of Herodotus, is that Darius was the name given to Cyrus at his birth by his mother, Mandane of Media, the daughter of the last Median king, Astyages, and the queen consort of Combyses I, the king of Persia. Cyrus then joined together the kingdoms of Media and Persia in his own person.

Steinman suggests that Astyages is the same figure as Ahasuerus, of whom Darius is said to be the son, in chapter 9 verse 1. Alternatively, it may be a Persian royal title enjoyed by one of Cyrus' ancestors.

[16:55] It's important to note that royal names and titles were often held by several different figures over the history of these kingdoms, and that one person might have gone by a number of different names. We see something similar in modern royalty. King George VI, for instance, had Albert as his primary name and his christening, but bore the name George on the throne. He was one of six monarchs to be called George. Prince Albert of York is the same person as George VI, but George VI should not be confused with any of the previous Georges. Things become more complicated when the rule of two kingdoms are joined together. James VI of Scotland, for instance, was James I of England. An identification of Darius the Mede and Cyrus has the benefit of making sense of the prophetic importance of the first year of his reign, and also of his significance as a figure more generally. It still, however, leaves us with questions about the seeming discrepancies in the description of the relative prominence of the Medes and Persians at the time of the overthrow of Babylon. Other positions exist. Some scholars identify Darius with a different Gubaru, a man appointed by Cyrus to rule over Babylon. A few others identify him with the son of Cyrus the Great. Carl Friedrich Kiel, Paul Tanner and Bajon all make the case for the identification of Darius as Syaxeres II, the son of Astyages, the brother of Mandane, the uncle of Cyrus the Great and a Median king. Josephus, Saint Jerome and John Calvin are among many who advocated for this position historically. The existence of Syaxeres II is disputed, however.

He is not mentioned in Herodotus' histories, but is prominently mentioned in Xenophon's work. Our understanding of the movement of the Medo-Persian Empire to a Persian-dominated empire will be greatly shaped by our determination of the existence or non-existence of this figure.

If he existed, he was the senior ruler in the Medo-Persian confederacy, with his nephew Cyrus, who led the campaign against Babylon, taking his place at the time of his death.

According to Xenophon, Syaxeres gave Cyrus his daughter and the kingdom of Medea with her. Kiel suggests that he would have been called Darius as a Persian title that he bore as the king of the United Kingdom of the Medes and Persians. This would fit very neatly with the biblical account. There are other historical texts and artefacts that lend support to the idea that the Medes and Persians were equal partners, or even that the Medes were the senior partners in a confederacy, some time after Cyrus and Persia were supposed to be dominant within the prevailing academic historical account. This account of the history, however, conflicts with that of Herodotus, which

historians generally prefer. The chapter begins with Darius setting up a new regime, 120 satraps, three high officials, and Darius himself makes 124, 62 times 2. 62 was one sum of the weights mentioned in the writing on the wall, and also the age of Darius when he received the kingdom. Daniel swiftly distinguishes himself from the other high officials and satraps, on account of his gifting by the Spirit of God. So gifted was Daniel that the king wanted to make him the administrator of the whole kingdom. This unsurprisingly led to great envy among the other high officials and satraps, and they sought to find some way to bring Daniel down. The officials and satraps sought to find some dirt on Daniel. However, Daniel proved to be without corruption when they surveilled him. The only hope that they had to bring Daniel down was through his piety as a faithful worshipper of the Lord. Recognising this, the high officials and satraps conspired together and went to the king, proposing a policy that he be the universal mediator of the kingdom for a month.

[20 : 31] For that period of time, he should be the only intermediary between the people and the gods. It is likely that the high officials and satraps presented this as a matter of political prudence. A religious vacuum had been created, as Nabonidus had gathered all the idols and images from the various cities into Babylon, as the Medo-Persians had advanced against him. Presenting Darius as the cultic focal point for 30 days before things were restored to normal could help to unite the kingdom under his rule. Just as the people of Israel were to be bound together by the unified and single cult focused upon Jerusalem, so the people of the Medo-Persian Empire were supposed to be bound together with this cult that was focused upon Darius as the universal intermediary for this period of time. The high officials and satraps likely represented this as a consensus decision that they had arrived at altogether, although it's hard to believe that Daniel was present. They present this in terms of the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked. The law here is a sort of divinised entity. Kings may come and go, even great priest-kings, but the law will endure unchanged.

Ironically, if the law of the Medes and Persians is like the genome, there seems to be a sort of epigenome that arises in order to determine when the law will be enacted and enforced or not. The law, which is seen as a great symbol of the power of the people who make it, ends up being a power that exercises rule over them. Darius will find himself trapped by the law of his own creation. When Daniel discovers that the law has been ratified, he goes back to his house and continues his religious practice. Daniel's habitual practice involves three occasions of prayer every single day. Many have regarded these times of prayer as corresponding with daily rituals in the temple. Even after the temple is destroyed and people are exiled far from Jerusalem, there are people who continue patterns of piety that look back to the life of Israel within the land. The fact that Daniel's worship is oriented towards Jerusalem is important evidence of this. Daniel does not make a scene of public disobedience here, but he does not divert from his usual practice. He has an existing pattern of piety and he continues in it. Had he not such an existing pattern of piety, it would have been much easier for him to compromise at this point. The fact that the conspirators knew that Daniel would continue in his religious devotion, irrespective of the threat of being thrown to the lions, testifies to Daniel's fearless character and his unswerving commitment to the Lord. The conspirators, having caught Daniel in the act as they had hoped, inform the king and remind him that the law cannot be revoked. Daniel must be thrown to the lions, there is no way of stopping it. The king presumably recognises at this point that he has been trapped, that his advisors and those ruling under him have manipulated him for the sake of their own envy. The law, which should have been the means of his power, ends up being a power against him. He is powerless to prevent the sentence from being enacted, even though he might try. The conspirators eventually insist that the sentence be carried through and the king has to comply. He commands that Daniel be placed in the den of lions, but he declares his fervent desire that Daniel be saved from their mouths by the Lord whom he trusts.

Perhaps he had heard the story of Daniel's three friends being saved from the fiery furnace earlier. Daniel is placed in the den, a stone is placed over the entrance of the den, and the stone is sealed with the king's signet so that it might not be removed. The king, who has a deep sympathetic concern for Daniel, does not want to see him destroyed, and so fasts and cannot sleep that whole night.

[24 : 02] The next morning he goes to the den and calls out to Daniel, hoping against hope that he is still alive. Answering the king, Daniel declares that the Lord shut the mouths of the lions, sending his angel to protect Daniel from them. Just like his three friends in chapter 3, when he is taken out,

no harm is found to have come to him. The evil of the conspirators, however, comes back upon their own head. They are thrown into the den of lions with all of their families.

The lions immediately devour them. We earlier noted the way that the number 62, the age of Darius as he came to the throne, connects this chapter, concerning the first year of his reign, with the prophecy of chapter 9. That prophecy relates to the end of the 70 years of the exile. It also relates to the 70th week of years that is foretold. Concerning the first, we should recognise that the rise of the Medo-Persian Empire is the sign that the exile in Babylon has come to an end. As a beast, the Babylonian empire is represented as a lion, and the deliverance of faithful Daniel from the den of lions is a microcosm of the deliverance of his people from exile. While they were in exile, the mouths of many had sought to devour them, and yet the Lord preserved his people from the mouths of all of the lions. They will be brought out of the Babylonian den of exile and returned to the land. Beyond this reference to the end of the 70 years, we should also recognise its relationship with the end of the 70 weeks of years. In this respect, it foreshadows the resurrection of Christ. Christ would be placed in the den of the great lion, the realm of the grave in which Satan himself prowls. A stone would be placed over the entrance to his tomb, and it would be sealed. However, when a new morning dawned, he would emerge unharmed, having overcome death itself.

A question to consider, how might this chapter help us to read the vision of the beasts in the chapter that follows?