

PUT OUT TO PASTURE
Daniel 4:1-37

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One of the frequent themes of scripture is that God embraces those with a humble heart and rejects those with a haughty spirit. In the Old Testament, for example, the wise sage wrote, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Proverbs 16:18). Preaching a parallel message, Jesus taught, “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee [proud] and the other a tax collector [humble]. . . .” At the end of his story, Jesus declared, “. . . everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14). Repeatedly and uniformly, scripture teaches that God will pull down the proud.

Mary herself, in her Magnificat, saw her election to bear the Messiah as God’s “regard for the humble state of His bondservant. . . .” She also recalled God’s punishment of the proud when she declared, “He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones. . . .” (Luke 1:46-55). Ironically, Mary sang of a situation much like our passage in Daniel 4—God brings down rulers from their thrones!

The Opening Hymn of Praise (4:1-3)

To many scholars, this opening praise to “the Most High God” seems out of place. We should, however, understand that the dramatic dream and its interpretation are sandwiched between opening (vs. 1-3) and closing (vs. 34-37) hymns of praise. God employed “signs and wonders” (emphasized by repetition, vs. 2-3) to make known to Nebuchadnezzar that God alone is sovereign in all matters, including the appointment of kings and kingdoms. As we shall discover in this chapter, having been humbled by the horrific events of this dehumanizing episode, Nebuchadnezzar rejoiced in being delivered from his animalistic madness.

Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream Report (4:4-18)

A. The Setup (vs. 4-5)

While Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream is not dated according to a year of his reign (compared to the first dream in 2:1, which is dated), we can safely conclude that this dream occurred later in his forty-three-year reign (605-562 B.C.). The evidence supporting a later date includes the obvious stability and success of the empire. Nebuchadnezzar, it seems, was relaxing in his Hanging Gardens in a state of self-satisfaction (“at ease and flourishing in my palace,” v. 4). At this point, the king seemed to have defeated all his opponents (the last, Phoenicia, in 571 B.C.) and completed his massive building projects.

In the midst of his megalomaniacal musings, Nebuchadnezzar had another nightmare, perhaps even more disturbing than his first dream. In his first dream (2:1), Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom was

one of several ultimately replaced by God's Kingdom (2:36-45). In Nebuchadnezzar's second nightmare, however, Nebuchadnezzar was personally threatened for his prideful spirit.

B. The unwise wise men (vs. 6-7)

Reminiscent of their first failure (2:10-11, 27), the Chaldean conjurers were unable (or unwilling) to interpret the dream for their king. Unlike the demands related to the first dream, the king was only requiring his wise men to interpret the dream, not divinely make it known (cf. 2:2-11). Despite the simplified demands with Nebuchadnezzar's second nightmare, the diviners were defeated once again: "they could not make its interpretation known" (v. 7).

C. A spirit of the holy gods (vs. 8-9)

Finally, following the failure of his fellow wise men, Daniel came forth to make known the meaning of the mysterious dream. Nebuchadnezzar described Daniel as having "a spirit of the holy gods." Being a polytheist, Nebuchadnezzar attributed Daniel's giftedness to pagan gods, ignoring the God of gods and Lord of kings (2:47). Having previously proven his prowess as an interpreter of dreams, Daniel was recognized by the king as beyond being baffled (v. 9).

D. A tree in the midst of the earth (vs. 10-18)

The idea of a cosmic tree was frequent in antiquity. Notice the tree was placed in a prominent location—"the midst of the earth." Such a symbol was employed by various cultures as an icon for power, vitality, and protection. Under such colossal trees, the inhabitants of creation were nurtured. The gargantuan branches offered foliage and fruit that both sheltered and fed the birds of the air and beasts of the field. Readers of the Old Testament are familiar with the imagery of Ezekiel 31 (cf. Ezekiel 17:1-10), where pharaoh is depicted as a towering cedar of Lebanon which touched the clouds.

As Nebuchadnezzar lay on his bed, focusing on the foliage and fruit of the towering tree, an "angelic watcher" descended upon the dream-like scene declaring a message. The Hebrew word for "angel" is translated literally as "one who is awake."

With a clarion call, the angelic watchman commanded the chopping down of the cosmic, towering tree. Following its fall, the birds and beasts had to retreat to alternative shelter. The stump and roots, however, were to remain, banded with iron and bronze. Most likely, the remaining stump signified a hint of hope, as the tree was not utterly destroyed. The band, likewise, served as a protective wrapping of the remnant of the once-great, towering timber.

Inexplicably, the dream makes a metaphorical leap as the images are suddenly switched (v. 15). Without warning, the angel ended all talk about the cosmic tree and spoke of a man who is transformed into a beast. Before we protest too profusely about mixed metaphors (the jumbled images of a tree being addressed as a man, who, in turn, becomes beast-like), we would do well to remember that such is the very nature of the dream state. In our dreams, the rules of nature that govern the "wide-awake" world are null and void. In dreams, trees are men, and men transform into beasts seamlessly, without the concerns or questions of the fully conscious world. In one of my most memorable dreams, I could "fly," effortlessly airborne, from city to city without any regard for gravity. That which was unquestionably accepted in my 2:00 a.m. dream, flying, brought a chuckle within when I awoke at 6:00 a.m.

The reference to “seven periods” of time has stirred much debate among biblical scholars. Exactly how long will the tree-man remain beast-like? The best translations of the Aramaic, ‘iddan, is “seven appointed times,” denoting a fixed and definite period. The translations that read “seven periods of time” (NASB, ESV) capture the essence of the designation more accurately than those that read “seven years” (NIV). Most likely the “seven periods” is symbolic of the complete time necessary to humble Nebuchadnezzar—much like the “seven times” hotter furnace was completely hot (v. 3:19).

Daniel’s Interpretation of the Dream (4:19-27)

Like their former failure in chapter 2, the Chaldean conjurers were unable to declare the meaning of the dream to the king. Once again, therefore, Daniel steps forward to deliver the dream’s interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar. Even the pagan potentate recognized Daniel as having divine guidance. The king declared to Daniel, “...you are able, for a spirit of the holy gods is in you” (4:18b). As a polytheistic pagan (believing in many gods), Nebuchadnezzar had neatly (or so he thought) subsumed Yahweh—the one-and-only true God—into the existing structure of his theological framework.

As Daniel discerned the troubling meaning of Nebuchadnezzar’s nightmare, he displayed “shock and awe” in his countenance. The king himself, therefore, coaxed the Judean wise man to come forth candidly with the true meaning of the dream. Perhaps softening the blow, Daniel “wished” the interpretation on the king’s enemies rather than the king himself. This familiar formula of “wishing a message on one’s enemies” is found on several occasions in the Old Testament where the messenger seeks to distance himself from an unwelcomed message (1 Samuel 25:26; 2 Samuel 18:32). After all, Nebuchadnezzar was well-known for his fits of rage. In chapter 2, the king became “very furious” and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon (2:12). In the next chapter, Nebuchadnezzar was “filled with wrath” and heated the fiery furnace sevenfold to mend his shattered pride (3:19).

In short, Daniel prophetically declared that Nebuchadnezzar himself was the tree (v. 22). Like the towering timber, the king’s influence had reached into the sky above and to the ends of the earth below. If the tall tree was the king, the decree of the “angelic watcher” was the very command of the Most High God. Nebuchadnezzar would, therefore, be reduced to a fallen tree and a beast-like creature who would be forced to leave the comfort of the palace to graze in dew-drenched pastures. This animal-like state would persist (seven periods of time) until the arrogant king recognized the reality of God’s absolute sovereignty. While kingdoms rise and fall and kings come and go, God alone sits forever on his throne. Rather than reflecting on himself as a “self-made man,” the powerful king was humbled as less-than-a-man until he identified the Most High God as the only true maker and breaker of men. Finally, the spared stump and roots represented the restoration of the king once he recognized that “heaven rules” (v. 26).

Displaying a hopeful grace, Daniel candidly calls upon the king to cease sinning and “do righteousness” and “show mercy to the poor” (v. 27). Only then can the king be placed back into prosperity.

The Fulfillment of the Dream (4:28-33)

In summary fashion, our writer informs us that, “all this happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king” (v. 28). Despite Daniel’s call to repentance from sin and reverence for God, the king continued to bask in his selfish pride for another year (twelve months, v. 29). Strutting like a proud peacock and surveying his royal residence from his rooftop, Nebuchadnezzar egotistically held up his OWN (I, myself, my, my) glory and majesty (v. 30).

With one word from heaven, the king not only lost his throne (v. 31), but, also, his place among people—he became a beast (v. 32-33). The condition of the king has been likened to “boanthropy” (ox-man) or “lycanthropy” (wolf-man). In such conditions a human takes on the identity and behavior of an animal. Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison once observed a patient in a British mental institution with a similar illness. The patient wandered the premises grazing on grass, and his physical abnormalities consisted of “a lengthening of the hair and a coarse, thickened condition of the fingernails.” With feather-like coarse and matted hair and accompanying claws (v. 33), the king, who once saw himself as superior to all other men, was, suddenly, subhuman.

“He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble” (Luke 1:51-52).

The King’s Restoration and Concluding Hymn of Praise (4:34-37)

At the divinely appointed time (the end of the seven periods), Nebuchadnezzar looked to heaven, and his reason was restored (v. 34). The action of looking heavenward is a clear symbol of his full submission to God as the sovereign over kings and kingdoms.

While Nebuchadnezzar had once been a tree that towered into heaven (4:11, 20), he now had been humbled by a messenger from heaven (v. 4:13), causing him to look to heaven (4:34) to, at last, declare God as the King of Heaven (4:34, 35). “Heaven,” in either the Aramaic or Hebrew form, occurs 24 times in Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar finally learned that, even as a towering tree, he was not the apex of power or control.

Conclusion

The Most High God has no patience for human pride. From the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) to the King of Babylon (Daniel 4), God will humble those who exalt themselves. We, too, must be reminded that God alone has reason to revel in his own righteousness.