

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Daniel 2

Dr. Howard Batson
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Introduction

He shot straight up out of the bed, his forehead wet with sweat and his pulse pounding. The bed linens were tangled like a well-worn fishing net. Nebuchadnezzar had been haunted by a horrible dream, a nightmare.

For just such unsettling situations, he kept a whole cadre of Chaldean diviners—magicians, conjurers, sorcerers, and the like. Surely, now that Nebuchadnezzar needed them more than ever before, the Babylonian wise men would be able to comfort their king by giving him the keys to unlock the meaning of his never-ending nightmare.

We have all tossed and turned on the relentless bed of restlessness. At night, the demons of the day take advantage of our anxieties, fears, uncertainties, and deepest doubts. Those of us who might appear to reign as Chaldean kings during the day find ourselves tortured about tomorrow's worries as night falls. Darkness always has its demons and troubling dreams.

In our second sermon in our Daniel series, we take a look at Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare and Daniel's God-given gift to be able to interpret the dream.

Calling the Chaldean Conjurers (2:1-3)

Seeking answers to the questions raised by his restless night of dramatic dreams, the king called all his soothsayers together to solve his puzzling nightmare. The crux of the problem becomes clear in verse 3 as Nebuchadnezzar seeks to know the meaning of his dream. Ancient Jewish historian Josephus concluded that Nebuchadnezzar had, in fact, forgotten his own dream, thus explaining his forthcoming request that his advisors recall it for him. Nothing in the verse itself, however, indicates that the monarch had a memory loss. Maybe?

Calling on the King with Confidence (2:4)

The diviners were trained in solving the mystery of dreams. Manuals were carefully kept that described common elements found in dreams and the interpretations of various dream symbols. Surprisingly enough, actual samples of those Akkadian interpretive dream manuals have been discovered. Having memorized the manuals, the diviners were ready to relieve the king's anxiety by interpreting his dream.

Demanding an Account of the Dream (2:5)

The king's words are rendered literally as "the command from me is firm." If they did not catch the tone of the king's command, he followed up with the vow to tear his wise men from limb to limb and turn their houses into rubbish should they fail to recall and interpret the dream. While

many megalomaniacal potentates might bluff with empty threats, Nebuchadnezzar's history demonstrates that he was to be taken seriously. For example, his harsh treatments of King Zedekiah (2 Kings 25:7), two Jewish rebels (Jeremiah 29:22), and Daniel's three friends (Daniel 3) prove that he would have no qualm about carrying out his cruel threat on his counselors. The reason for the king's ridiculous demand that the diviners tell him his own dream was clear: He wanted to be able to verify their interpretation of his nightmare based upon their ability to also reveal the contents of his dream.

Negotiating with Nebuchadnezzar (2:6-9)

Fair negotiations take place when both parties are of equal power. In this particular incident, the diviners were desperate because the king was absolute in both his power and authority. The alternative to being dismembered by the megalomaniacal king was the promise of great rewards if they both recalled and interpreted his nightmare. Otherwise, the king realized how easy it would be for the diviners to conspire concerning the interpretation of his dream, assuring him of the accuracy of their fanciful interpretation until such a time as the political winds were blowing in a different direction.

Confessing Chaldeans (2:10-11)

Perhaps the apex of the problem emerges as the pagan soothsayers actually proclaimed the truth: There was no human on earth, magician or otherwise, who could recall the contents of the king's dream. The sages and soothsayers had only been taught how to interpret dreams, not how to reveal them. The Chaldeans continued their confession as they declared that one would have to be a "god" dwelling beyond mortal flesh in order to be able to meet the king's demands.

What is interesting about the Chaldean confession, however, is the fact that they did not even imagine a scenario by which their Babylonian gods could empower them to deliver the contents of the king's dream. They simply assumed that their gods were either incapable or unwilling to help. The prophet Isaiah predicted a day when Babylon would be absolutely helpless, as her astrologers and enchanters were impotent before the powers that crushed them:

Stand fast now in your spells and in your many sorceries with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you will be able to profit, perhaps you may cause trembling. You are wearied with your many counsels; let now the astrologers, those who prophesy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you. Behold, they have become like stubble, fire burns them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame; there will be no coal to warm by nor a fire to sit before! (Isaiah 47:12-14).

Looking for Daniel (2:12-16)

Unfortunately, the true tragedy of the narrative unfolds. Though Daniel and his friends had not even heard the king's demand to both proclaim and interpret his nightmare, they would receive the king's wrath—death penalty—as would all the king's counselors throughout the land.

Verse 13 is in a participle form, meaning it could be translated "beginning to execute," implying that some of the sages were already beginning to be killed. Thus, the writer raised the tensions in the narrative as we wonder if Daniel and his friends will be next.

Again, the Judeans (Daniel and his friends) were not involved in the king's request for the recall and interpretation of his dream. This may be another indication that they were still involved in their training program—associated with the sages but not yet advanced enough to be given the chance to interpret for the king.

Daniel acted wisely, and yet candidly, when he spoke to Arioch, the captain of the king's bodyguard, who had come to carry out the death sentence against the Judeans. Daringly enough, Daniel went in to the king despite the fact that all of the king's servants knew that if any man or woman entered the king's inner court without being called, he or she was most likely to be put to death (Esther 4:11).

Praying for Compassion (2:17-18)

Before Daniel was able to declare the dream to the king (see 1:17), he asked his three friends to pray, requesting that the “God of heaven” be compassionate upon him as he endeavored to master the king's mysteries. Daniel's friends are once again called by their Hebrew names, which speak to the power of God. Hannaniah means “Yahweh is gracious”; Mishael means “Who is what God is?”; and Azariah means “Yahweh will help.” The careful reader should not miss that in calling his friends by their Hebrew names, Daniel was already declaring that his God—who is above all other gods—will deliver. Masterfully, this point is further made by the fact that their Hebrew names disappear after this passage.

Daniel's request was clear: “Plead for mercy.” Here, God is called the “God of heaven,” a name most frequently used for Yahweh in portions of the Bible that occur after the Babylonian exile (Ezra 1:2; 6:10; 7:12, 21; Nehemiah 1:4-5; 2:4). It was the title by which the Persians recognized the God of Israel (see Cyrus' decree in Ezra 1:2).

Making Known the Mystery (2:19-23)

In verse 19, we learn that the *raz* (mystery) is revealed to Daniel. This word indicates something that cannot be ascertained through conventional wisdom or reason. Such a mystery can only be solved by divine revelation.

Daniel responded to the revelation with a song of thanksgiving. In his song, Daniel highlighted two aspects of God's character that play a pivotal role in this saga: (1) Despite the fact that Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar appear to have all power, God himself, in fact, holds all authority; and (2) God is wise, and he alone dispenses all wisdom. Most importantly, we must not miss the fact that Daniel tipped his hat in regard to the dream's interpretation when he said in verse 21, “[God] changes the times and the epochs; he removes kings and establishes kings; he gives wisdom to wise men and knowledge to men of understanding.” Daniel was making clear that God alone governs the different eras and events of human history and is able to change them at will.

Delaying the Destruction (2:24-25)

Relief is welcomed in the narrative as Daniel received both the dream and its interpretation, and, thus, there is no need to destroy the “wise men of Babylon.” Having already secured his own salvation by delivering the dream, Daniel was still concerned for others, as he requested that even the pagan wise men not be destroyed. While Daniel was thinking about others, Arioch was

making sure that he himself gets credit for the solution to the king's unsolved mystery: "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can make the interpretation known to the king!" (v. 25).

Recognizing God's Revelation (2:26-30)

The set-up is spectacular. Daniel began rather discouragingly by telling the king that no one on earth, even the wisest of persons, could possibly know the contents of the dream. At first, Daniel's concession sounded like that of the other, clueless wise men. But then Daniel declared, "However, there is a God in heaven who reveals...." In fact, with this declaration Daniel gives us the supreme theme of the book, maybe even the greatest word of the Bible: God reveals.

Ultimately, of course, God reveals in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. We read in the book of Hebrews, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high..." (Hebrews 1:1-3).

At last, Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare has been solved. The puzzle has been pieced together—not by Daniel, but by Daniel's God, the God of heaven!

The dream and the interpretation were both from God, most of which is now factual history. And the best is yet to come.

The Statue (2:31-33)

Doing what the Chaldean sages could not, Daniel declared the king's dream with clarity. In the dream, the king saw a gargantuan statue, one of extraordinary splendor. In ancient near-Eastern dreams, gigantic figures were a frequent theme.

Nebuchadnezzar's nightmare contained a statue made with a casting of a combination of different metals. While the layered metals seem odd to our sensibilities, statues built in Babylon and Persia often contained a combination of precious metals including bronze and iron joined and covered with gold and silver.

While the text itself makes no mention of the monetary value of the various metals, the careful reader will quickly note that the value of the metals employed in making the statue decline in value from head to toe; the head is cast out of fine gold while the feet are a combination of iron and common clay. Although many modern translations describe the statue as "awesome" (v. 31), a better translation would be "dreadful." Taken as a whole, the various metals suggest a combination of both costliness and strength. Yet, as we cast our eyes to the bottom, to the feet, we realize that the brittle clay represents vulnerability in what would otherwise be a foreboding figure for any nightmare. Surely this statue anticipates the statue to be formed by Nebuchadnezzar himself in chapter 3.

The Stone (2:34)

Two characters create the plot in Nebuchadnezzar’s nightmare—the statue and the stone. The stone does not represent something created, as it was “cut out without hands.” All cosmic elements are divided between the created and the creator. Therefore, we can conclude with some confidence that the stone represents the creator himself. The plot unfolds as the stone strikes the statue’s one point of vulnerability, the clay feet. David’s smooth stone, which struck the armor-covered giant, comes to mind. In David’s case, of course, the vulnerable target point was the head and not the feet.

The Chaff (2:35)

As the stone struck the feet, the entirety of the statue was demolished. The crushing was so comprehensive that all the precious metals were simultaneously broken apart into chaff-like particles which were simply blown away by the wind, leaving no trace of the once-fearsome figure. Surprisingly, the striking stone was transformed into an enormous mountain capable of filling the whole earth.

The Interpretation (2:36-45)

Daniel, apparently, was not above using a little flattery in revealing the mysteries of the megalomaniacal king’s dream. He began his interpretation by describing Nebuchadnezzar as the “king of kings, to whom the God of heaven had given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory.” “King of kings,” a superlative title, was also applied to Nebuchadnezzar in Ezekiel 26:7. It was used, likewise, as a title for Persian monarchs.

Despite Daniel’s kind words to the king, however, we must not miss Daniel’s central message: God is the maker and breaker of kings and kingdoms. Already in his song of thanksgiving, Daniel had declared that God “removes kings” and “establishes kings” (v. 21). Now, though packaged in praise, Daniel was communicating, once again, that Nebuchadnezzar held power only as a gift from the God of heaven. God himself gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom, power, strength and glory (v. 37). Lest the reader miss Daniel’s message, he repeated it again in verse 38, where he restated that he (the God of heaven) had placed all creatures under the rule of the king. Thus, because of God’s own choosing, Nebuchadnezzar was, for the moment, the head of gold (v. 38). Great debate exists, however, concerning the identity of the other kings/kingdoms in Nebuchadnezzar’s nightmare.

While we should not miss the overarching message that God is sovereign and kingdoms rise and fall, we will attempt to deal, nonetheless, with the details concerning the identity of the future kingdoms. Below are two interpretive schemes that represent the two most common readings of the kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar’s nightmare.

Five kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar’s nightmare

Elements of the Dream	Scheme 1	Scheme 2
Head of Gold	Nebuchadnezzar/Babylonian Empire (605-539 B.C.)	Nebuchadnezzar/Babylonian Empire
Arms and chest of silver	Medo/Persian Empire (539-331 B.C.)	Medo Empire
Belly and thighs of	Greek Empire	Persian Empire

bronze	(331-146 B.C.)	
Legs of iron/feet of iron and clay	Roman Empire (146 B.C.-A.D. 395)	Greek Empire
Stone/mountain	Kingdom of God	Kingdom of God

Daniel was bringing a good word to those who were oppressed, exiled from God's land. God himself causes the rise of worldly kings and kingdoms and will, in due time, defeat all such forces that seek to oppose God. God's kingdom, and God's kingdom alone, will expand and take over the world; in fact, it will become an all-consuming mountain.

The Response (2:46-49)

The king was awed, but not converted. As a polytheist, the king was more than willing to acknowledge the power of foreign deities, giving Yahweh credit for the power displayed in Daniel's ability to decipher the dream.

Earlier, Nebuchadnezzar was described by Daniel as the "king of kings" (v. 37). Employing another superlative, the text asserts that Yahweh is actually "the God of gods" (v. 47). He is also, moreover, the "Lord of kings."

As a result of Daniel's both stating and interpreting the king's dream, Daniel was given a high position. This text describes him as "ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon" (v. 48). Apparently, Daniel's position was twofold. First, he administrated the key province of the empire, the very one that included the capital city, Babylon. Second, he was appointed chief counselor to the king with authority over all the other wise men.

Daniel, however, did not forget his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. With a masterful stroke of transition, the author of Daniel mentions Daniel's Judean friends to prepare us for their very prominent story to be found in chapter 3.

Conclusion

There are many lessons to be learned from contemplating the characters, images, and actions found at the end of chapter 2.

1. God is actively working in human history. Though kingdoms rise and fall, Yahweh is not surprised by the seating and unseating of kings. The best way to approach this text is not to become fixated on which countries or kingdoms are represented by the various elements of the statue. On the contrary, the writer has used broad strokes to paint a picture of God's active role in the rising and falling of kings and kingdoms. The writer was hoping that his readers, then in exile, would find hope even at their darkest moment.

2. Ultimately, God's kingdom is all that matters. The end of the vision, the crushing stone, represents the kingdom of God. With the enormity of a mountain that fills the entirety of the earth, the kingdom of God will prevail. That kingdom, indeed, has already begun in the person of Jesus, whose primary message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Indeed, did he not teach his disciples to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your

name. Your kingdom come....” Ultimately, despite the coming and going of worldly kingdoms, God’s kingdom will prevail. The apostle John, in his Apocalypse, states, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Though the kingdom has already arrived in the person of Jesus, we await its full consummation upon his second advent.

3. Beware of applauding human achievements. Nebuchadnezzar was more than pleased to be called the “king of kings” and be depicted by the “head of gold” (2:37-38). And, to be sure, Daniel himself received accolades that approximated worship, as the king prostrated himself and presented an offering. In the midst of the accolades for human achievement, we must remember what Daniel himself had said: “God alone can do what men cannot.” Perhaps the best takeaway line in the whole chapter is found in verse 28: “However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries....”