

DANIEL – The Prophet Of Dreams

The last of the four great prophets is Daniel. Like Ezekiel, he was taken prisoner to Babylon, where he was talent-spotted by Nebuchadnezzar and eventually promoted to be a top rank advisor to the king. In this position he could influence the treatment of his people, teaching the pagan monarch to respect Israel's God. Thus we have three great prophets all active at the same time, one in Jerusalem and two in Babylon. God was surely watching over His people at this critical time.

As a young man, Daniel and three of his friends were selected to be trained in the universities of Babylon, absorbing the language and culture. Daniel came to prominence after the King woke up from a nightmare, but could not remember the details. The interpretation of dreams was important to the Babylonians (they were obsessed with wanting to know the future). The king grew angry when his professionals failed to satisfy his curiosity, so Daniel asked the God of Israel to reveal the dream to him. Like Joseph standing before Pharaoh centuries before, he was given the power to interpret it. The king had seen a giant idol made of four different metals, which stood on feet of iron and clay. A stone from heaven struck the image, ground it to dust, then grew until it filled the whole world. And the interpretation? God had given the monarch an amazing glimpse of the whole history of the world, right to the time of the end. The gold head of the idol, Daniel said, stood for the Babylonian Empire. It would be followed by another empire, then another, and then another. After that there would be no more world empires

until the stone from heaven brought a new kingdom that would last forever. Looking back, we can see this is precisely what happened. When Babylon fell, the Medo-Persian Empire took over its territory. Then there were the Greeks, and finally the Roman Empire, which, like the two long legs of the image, lasted the longest. But after Rome fell, there has been no further universal kingdom until our own day. Like iron and clay, our world is ruled by a mixture of governments, with no true cohesion between them. The next event, dear reader, must therefore be the return of Jesus, the stone, from heaven, to turn this unhappy world into the Kingdom of God.

Daniel's three friends also had their day. Years later, Nebuchadnezzar decided on a public display of his power and importance. He commissioned a magnificent gold-plated idol on a plinth – it stood 90 feet (27m) high – and set it up in a vast open space. Then he commanded all the governors of his great empire to attend the dedication ceremony. They poured in to Babylon from as far away as Egypt and Carchemish (nobody dare upset the king), all dressed in their best suits. Then came the big day. The heralds shouted out in a variety of languages that when the orchestra began to play, everyone must bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's new god. Obediently, the thousands of officials fell on their faces like corn before a great wind. All except three. Daniel's three friends had agreed they could not compromise their principles. The Law of Moses said "no graven images and no bowing down to them". So they refused. A furious Nebuchadnezzar commanded

to burn them alive, but minutes later his eyes popped out when he saw them untouched by the flames, and an angel standing with them in the fire. When they emerged unscathed, he decided their God must be stronger than his. And the outcome was, the attendees returned to their distant lands with the news, not of Nebuchadnezzar's golden idol, but how three brave Jews had defied him and yet been saved by their God. So much for human pride!

Daniel's book is full of great stories. You must read them. He continued in the service of Babylon until he was an old man, and in 538 BC saw the fall of the city at the hands of the Medes and Persians, just as he had predicted. However, he found himself called out of retirement to help the new administration. He was appointed by Darius, the new ruler, as head of a triumvirate (three presidents) entrusted with the smooth running of the country. Perhaps Darius found Daniel knew the culture and customs of Babylon better than his Persian colleagues. Anyway, the other two presidents became jealous of Daniel, and plotted his downfall. They could find no fault in his work, for he was a man of great integrity. So they persuaded the king to issue a decree by which anyone who asked a petition from anyone other than him for a period of 30 days would be executed. It sounded harmless enough, and the king signed the papers. Eagerly the two envious officers paraded in front of Daniel's house. They knew he always prayed to his God from his balcony three times a day. Would he decide to pray out of sight for a month, to avoid the decree? Daniel knew the eyes of the Jewish community would look to him for a lead. He would not compromise. On cue, he opened his windows and fell

to his knees. That was all they needed. Soon the old man was arraigned in court, accused of breaking the law, found guilty, and thrown into the lion's den. But that was not the end of him. When King Darius went to the execution chamber next morning and undid the royal seal on the stone that acted as a door, the faithful prophet was still alive. His God had delivered him from the lions. And once again a decree rolled out across the new empire, honouring the God of the Jews. Interestingly, that makes two prophets, Jeremiah and Daniel, each consigned to a living tomb, sealed there by a stone, and then after a gap, walking free. They are a wonderful foreshadowing of what happened to Jesus. He too was falsely accused, executed, entombed behind a sealed stone - but then, to everyone's amazement, alive from the dead.

The rest of Daniel's writings from chapter seven onwards are concerned with prophecies of the future, incredibly true to subsequent history. These chapters go back to an earlier period - they belong to the time of Belshazzar, the last Babylonian king. Daniel had two sets of dreams of his own. In the first, four animals came out of the sea in turn - a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a fierce dragon-like beast. In the second he saw a contest between a ram and a male goat. The four beasts of chapter seven match the four empires in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, but this time the fourth, the Roman one, continues on in a modified form, oppressing God's people until the time of the end, when it is destroyed in the Last Day of judgment. The ram and the he-goat in chapter eight are identified within the chapter as the rulers of Persia and Greece, and history shows Daniel was right - the power of Persia fell before the growing might of Greece.

Perhaps the most astonishing prophecy is chapter eleven, which is a long, blow by blow account of the future wars between the Seleucid kings of the north, based in Syria, and the Ptolomies of Egypt. There are around 15 kings or queens mentioned in the chapter (including the infamous Cleopatra), and the chapter includes a vivid picture of the rise of the Roman Empire, some three and a half centuries after Daniel died.

It finishes, as do so many prophecies, with a jump to the Time of the End, and

Daniel's version of the destruction of a latter-day king from the North on the mountains of Israel. The aged prophet, dismayed that so many events must take place before the Kingdom of God, is comforted with these kind words – "you shall rest, and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days." Daniel 12:13.

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