

Reading Notes for Daniel 2

Nebuchadnezzar barely has time to savour his blistering military success against the Assyrians and Egyptians (at Carchemish) and coming to the throne of his father when a dream unsettles him. Accomplishment, respect and power have not secured him. He seems to have forgotten the content of the dream (or makes out that he has) but knows it is a matter of state importance and calls in his advisors. These men are not ‘wise’ as defined in *Proverbs* but have studied various means of interpreting dreams, making sense of signs and influencing outcomes with magic arts. Because the Babylonians believe gods may reveal the future in dreams, the role of these men is critical in the governance of the state.

This chapter may fit inside the time frame of chapter one because this is the second year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign but he has allowed three years for the training and approval of his new recruits (1:5, 19). The approval of chapter one and adulation of chapter two may overlap in some manner.

Does the king know that the unremembered dream is about the replacement of his kingdom with others? Whatever, his fear quickly turns to distrust of his counselors, irrational expectations, and then, cruelty. It is possible that he is eager to know if the dream is really from a deity and that this is why he demands his counselors tell him the dream. This will confirm that their interpretation is also valid. The severity of his threat suggests that, in the light of this unsettling revelation, he is disillusioned with what they can offer him.

The counselors know their limits. They have no real miraculous powers or any assurance that their gods will give them what is demanded. They argue that no man can do what is being asked, that no king usually asks this kind of thing, and that only inaccessible gods can operate in this way. Understandably, they play for time or for the king to become more reasonable. The scene is set for the arrival of Daniel, or rather, of God.

Daniel is summoned for execution, but God’s revelation to Israel has given this young man more than the power of Babylon can take from him—in particular, the Lord’s mercies (v. 18) that never fail. He knows that it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord, as Jeremiah says a few years later (Lam. 3:22-33).

Knowing God as the God of mercy has made him *prudent*, not just now, but by reputation; both Arioch and the king are willing to hear him out and grant him time. Knowing God also leads him to gather his friends to *pray* for mercy for themselves—a revelation of the dream and its meaning so they will not die. And God grants his request. His mercy has not failed, even here in Babylon. Now Daniel *praises* God. Knowing the dream and its meaning will not only save these young men; it will reveal the God who alone establishes earthly authority (as Jesus noted later at his trial—John 19:11) and who can announce what is to come.

Those who stand confidently before God can also stand confidently before human authority. Daniel asks for stay of execution for all the counselors (mercy is to be shared!) and for an audience with the king.

When the king asks if he can tell the dream and its meaning, Daniel compares the impotence of the counselors, not with himself, but with God in heaven—God who reveals mysteries (not the inaccessible gods of the nations). And this interpretation is not given to Daniel because he is great, or to make him so, but to help Nebuchadnezzar (v. 30).

The dream is about the future, a future God wants the king to know. Daniel can accurately report the dream of his king, so the king is ready to hear how this God of Daniel will interpret his dream. Taking dream and interpretation together, Nebuchadnezzar is the golden head of a magnificent and forbidding statue. So appear the kingdoms of this world to us all. God has given the king this power and glory. Man and beast are subject to him. But other kingdoms will replace his (as he has just replaced other super powers), albeit, not as glorious as his own. In fact, future super powers may be strong but suffer instability, division, and incompatibility. In those days, this whole structure—the kingdom of this world (cf. Rev. 11:15), the whole structure, clay and gold together, will be tumbled by a stone quarried by no human hand (cf. Isa. 28:16). As for the stone, it is the kingdom God will establish, to destroy all human kingdoms and become a mountain filling the earth. God will set up an everlasting kingdom and there will not remain a trace of any other kingdom.

Daniel says to his king, ‘You have seen a stone cut without hands, and what it did. The non-human quarrying is God himself, showing you the dream you demanded to know, and its meaning. Because it is from God, all that I have said can be trusted!’

Daniel is now honoured. and his God acknowledged as greater than Nebuchadnezzar and his gods—a God of gods and a Lord of kings. Daniel is also promoted to senior commander of Babylon and chief of his counselors. Immediately, Daniel ensures that he will be able to focus on being chief of counselors and makes room for his friends by asking that they be made responsible for the management of Babylon. There is no indication at this stage that Nebuchadnezzar is changed in heart. He acknowledges the superior power of Daniel’s God but acquires the benefit of this God by appointing Daniel to advise and administer for him.