

THE RESTORATION OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR AN EXPOSITION OF DANIEL 4:34-37

The book of Daniel is a theological battleground for many reasons. The heightened rhetoric surrounding the apocalyptic nature of the weeks, beasts, and kingdoms in the book characterize much of contemporary discussion on Daniel. But there is another theological hot topic that presents itself within the narrative of Daniel 4.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is presented in Daniel just like many other pagan kings in Scripture¹. He has no regard for Yahweh as King of kings and Lord of lords. Nebuchadnezzar's "pride made the boaster a beast,"² and in the end he joins with the chorus of Christian Scripture in praising the one true Sovereign over heaven and earth. This striking conclusion to the story of this king raises a basic question: is Nebuchadnezzar now a true believer in Yahweh? Or does his song merely show that his "affections may be much moved towards God, from self-love, by some remarkable outward benefits received from God."³

This question is not a new question. Many theologians throughout church history have weighed in on Nebuchadnezzar's song. They answer the question of whether or not Daniel gives the reader enough information about the state of the king's heart. Suffice it to say, the jury is split on this issue so further consideration of the text is warranted⁴. Careful attention to the narrative flow of Nebuchadnezzar's story, major themes in Daniel, and Daniel in the whole of Scripture will serve as guides in the task of interpretation.

Nebuchadnezzar's Story

The restoration of Nebuchadnezzar comes at the end of a lengthy and dramatic narrative. The praise on the lips of the king at the end of Daniel 4 is the direct result of God's judgment because of Nebuchadnezzar's pride. But through this judgment, the king is restored. The meaning of this restoration has significance on several levels.

Daniel 1-2: Introducing Nebuchadnezzar

Daniel 1 introduces the reader to Nebuchadnezzar as the conquering king of Babylon, but not until chapter 2 do we begin to see a clear picture of the king. Daniel 2 begins with the first dream of Nebuchadnezzar. The king, who is now in his second year of rule, is skeptical of the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and Chaldeans. Because of his skepticism, not only are these wise men charged with interpreting the meaning of the king's dream, but they also must first tell the king the dream. The men answer, "There is not a man *on earth* who can meet the king's demand" (Daniel 2:10). Nebuchadnezzar is said to be "angry and very furious," then ordering the destruction of all the wise men of Babylon (Daniel 2:12). The "*God of heaven*" reveals the dream and the interpretation of the dream to Daniel (Daniel 2:17), who then recounts the dream to the king.

¹ For example, Ahaz in Isaiah 7:12, Felix in Acts 24:22-26, Agrippa in Acts 26:27ff.

² C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings, March 6 PM*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).

³ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections: In Three Parts*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

⁴ Despite the lack of consensus on the issue, surprisingly little attention is given to this passage in most commentaries.

Nebuchadnezzar's response to Daniel's interpretation is instructive for understanding the progression of his character throughout Daniel 2-4. Nebuchadnezzar falls upon his face, paying homage to Daniel (Daniel 2:46), and says in verse 47, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery." Although this response to Daniel shows signs of genuineness⁵, the story that follows in Daniel 3 shows that "idolaters have no direction"⁶.

Daniel 3: Nebuchadnezzar's Pride In Full View

The first verse of Daniel 3 sheds light upon the true heart of Nebuchadnezzar's response to Daniel in Daniel 2:47. The king creates an image of gold that is to be worshipped by all those in his kingdom. Furthermore, the narrative repeatedly emphasizes this statue is the one that "King Nebuchadnezzar had set up" (Daniel 3:3,5,7,12). Even the three Jews respond to the king's charge to bow down with this same language (Daniel 3:18). Having not bowed down, the three men are then thrown into the fiery furnace where Yahweh subsequently rescues them.

After this clear deliverance by God, Nebuchadnezzar responds, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God" (Daniel 3:28). This second response by king Nebuchadnezzar to the miracles of Yahweh again has the appearance of genuineness and in a certain sense it is. Notice though that his praise is directed at "their own God," who is clearly not the God of Nebuchadnezzar. In the next verse Nebuchadnezzar still thinks he has the authority to command worship, even if his command is directed at Yahweh. This further clarifies that Nebuchadnezzar still does not have a heart that is humble before God⁷.

In the Masoretic Text of Daniel the first 3 verses of chapter 4 are a part of chapter 3. This additional doxology serves to conclude chapter 3 and introduce chapter 4. Here again it seems that Nebuchadnezzar has a growing knowledge and awareness of the true God, but he still does not humble himself before Him. In Daniel 4:2 Nebuchadnezzar narrates in the first person, "It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me." Clearly the following praise in Daniel 4:3 has the appearance of authenticity if not for verse 2 which introduces Nebuchadnezzar's praise of God because of "wonders that the Most High God has done for me." This arrogance and pride is intensified in chapter 4.

Daniel 4: The Second Dream, Exile, and Restoration

In Daniel 4:4 the scene is set for Nebuchadnezzar's second dream. Josephus wrote of Nebuchadnezzar's palace, "to describe the vast height and immense riches of which, it would perhaps be too much for me to attempt"⁸. The king is sitting comfortably in his palace and then he is startled by a dream. Like many proud men before and after Nebuchadnezzar, he repeats his earlier blunder, calling upon the wise men of Babylon to interpret his dream. It seems that the anger of Nebuchadnezzar has subsided from chapter 2 because when these men do not have an

⁵ Daniel uses language from Deuteronomy 10:17 that reflects at least a small recognition or understanding by Nebuchadnezzar concerning Yahweh as the one true God.

⁶ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Daniel: Lecture Notes*, (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, January 18, 2011).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Flavius. Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged, Ant 10.218-228*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1987).

interpretation he simply calls upon Daniel, “he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god” (Daniel 4:8). He then recounts his dream to Daniel who is alarmed by what he hears. With deep affection for the king, Daniel interprets the dream to Nebuchadnezzar.

The tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream represents the king, whose “greatness has grown and reaches *to heaven*,” and “dominion to the ends of *the earth*” (Daniel 4:22). This tree, Nebuchadnezzar, is to be cut down, the stump⁹ is to be left in the ground until “you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (Daniel 4:25). Furthermore, the cutting down of Nebuchadnezzar because of his pride means that he will also become like a beast of the field and be driven from among men. Then Daniel calls Nebuchadnezzar to repentance: “Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity” (Daniel 4:27). This call to repentance “must mean righteousness in the heart that leads to good deeds”¹⁰. Scholars differ on whether or not this genuine call for repentance by Daniel anticipates a later genuine repentance by Nebuchadnezzar. At this point at least, Daniel desires true repentance for the king.

After one year¹¹ (Daniel 4:29) Nebuchadnezzar again boasts of his own “mighty power” (Daniel 4:30) and immediately “a voice *from heaven*” (Daniel 4:31) pronounced the judgment upon the king, which came to pass immediately thereafter (Daniel 4:33). The king of Babylon is made to be like a beast of the earth, and this is the context from which God brings miraculous restoration.

The Heart of Daniel: Nebuchadnezzar’s Song

Up until this point in the narrative of Daniel the story has progressed in chronological pattern. This chronological pattern continues through Daniel 5 but is then disrupted in Daniel 6 with the story of Daniel in the lion’s den that takes place under Darius the Mede¹². This ordering of the narratives within Daniel serves a literary purpose in order to support the main idea of the book: humility of those on earth *under* the God of heaven.

The structure of the book of Daniel has many variations by a number of scholars, but most of these variations include the Aramaic chapters of Daniel (2-7) as a chiasmic arrangement¹³. Chapters 2 and 7 are corresponding visions of the 4 kingdoms. Chapters 3 and 6 depict the

⁹ Hamilton notes that Daniel could be describing Nebuchadnezzar as a parable for exiled Israel (Isaiah 6:8-13). Just as the stump of Isaiah 6:13 is the “holy seed” of Israel that will one day be restored, so to the stump that remains (Daniel 4:23) will be restored.

¹⁰ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 242.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 250. Steinmann and other scholars attribute this one-year delay to the patience of God on behalf of a prideful king. While I am sure this is true, I consider this delay to be recognition by Nebuchadnezzar of his admiration and respect for Daniel. Daniel has just finished prophetically pleading with the king to humble himself and repent before God so that he would not be judged. By his earthly power, the king desires to please Daniel, but pride is an evil master and after a year, Nebuchadnezzar has likely forgotten Daniel’s admonition.

¹² Depending upon how you phrase this lapse in chronology, the order could be said to be continuous through Daniel 6 and then in Daniel 7 the narrative jumps back.

¹³ Steinmann, 22. See also, James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 325. And Peter J. Gentry, *Daniel’s Seventy Weeks and the New Exodus*, (The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology, Volume 14 Number 1, Spring 2010), 26.

stories of God’s deliverance of his people from certain death in the fiery furnace and the lion’s den. And at the center of this arrangement are chapters 4 and 5, both depicting the humbling of a pagan king. The chiasmic arrangement helps the interpretation of every part in the arrangement, but the chiasmic arrangement also draws attention to the center of the chiasm. Often the central element of a chiasm is the main idea, which in the case of Daniel is abundantly clear.

Daniel 4:34-37 is the very epicenter of the entire book of Daniel. Just preceding this narrative is the humbling judgment of a prideful and arrogant king, Nebuchadnezzar. Just following this narrative, the arrogant Belshazzar is swiftly judged with death. Hamilton¹⁴ and Steinmann¹⁵ clearly link the judgment parallels between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar in chapters in 4 and 5 but neither devote much attention to the primary difference: Nebuchadnezzar is restored through judgment while Belshazzar is finally judged with no restoration. This further detail makes the chiasmic relationship between chapters 4 and 5 actually between Daniel 4:4-33 and Daniel 5:1-31, leaving Daniel 4:34-37 as the central passage to the entire book. Rather than humility of pagan *kings* through judgment as the central idea of the book, humility of a pagan *king* in restoration (even *salvation*) through judgment is the central idea¹⁶!

While this point is not necessarily a new interpretation, rather a proposed amendment to the chiasmic structure of the book as a whole, this additional emphasis upon verses 34-37 require further exposition of these verses, primarily through a broader biblical foundation.

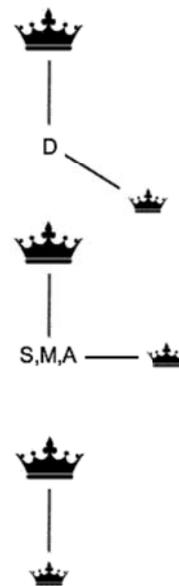
Nebuchadnezzar’s Song and Christian Scripture

Within the context of Nebuchadnezzar’s story in chapters 2-4 the language, and more importantly, the positional relationship between Nebuchadnezzar and God are more clearly delineated. Compare Nebuchadnezzar’s responses in chapters 2-4:

King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and *paid homage to Daniel*... The king answered... Daniel, “Truly, *your God* is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for *you have been able* to reveal this mystery.”
(Daniel 2:46-47, *emphasis mine*)

“Blessed be *the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*, who... delivered his servants, who trusted in him... *their own God*.
(Daniel 3:28, *emphasis mine*)

I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven... and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,
...
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among *the host of heaven*



¹⁴ Hamilton, *God’s Glory*, 326.

¹⁵ Steinmann, *Daniel*, 24, 282-284.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *God’s Glory*, 329. “Nebuchadnezzar is delivered through judgment, and as a result he glorifies God.” This refinement I’m suggesting to the widely held chiasmic structure of Daniel is not based upon a new idea I have come up with. Rather, as will be more clearly evidenced below, Daniel 4:34-37 uses very powerful language that echoes much of the salvation language throughout Christian Scripture.

and among the inhabitants of the earth;

...

I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven... and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

(Daniel 4:34-37, *emphasis mine*)

Notice the clear shifts in Nebuchadnezzar's position in each response in relation to God's action. Not until Daniel 4:34-37 does Nebuchadnezzar recognize his kingship as one that is on earth in subjection to God's heavenly kingship over him.

The song of Nebuchadnezzar in verses 34 and 35 have numerous allusions to many other texts throughout Christian Scripture. D.A. Carson recognizes allusions to Exodus 20:5 and Psalm 103:17 in verse 34's covenantal language¹⁷. More importantly, this song in verse 35 specifically develops Daniel's recurrent emphasis of heaven and earth language¹⁸. Nebuchadnezzar is clearly placing himself under the authority of King of kings whereas before he simply pays the King lip service. This positional shift is further born out in verse 37 when he speaks of God humbling the prideful, clearly speaking about himself. The import of this final response, this final praise, is clear: the earthly king finally recognizes his rightful place under the authority of the King of heaven.

Daniel 4:34-37: Heaven and Earth

The New Testament witness to the book of Daniel, with approximately 200 references, is more numerous than the unbelievable amount Old Testament allusions and references Daniel picks up on. "As Craig Evens points out, 'proportionately, this puts Daniel in the same category as Isaiah and the Psalms, the books most frequently quoted and alluded to in the New Testament'¹⁹. The book of Daniel is built upon the earliest writings in the Torah and the Prophets, and the most frequent quotations and allusions to Daniel in New Testament books are the Gospel of Matthew and the Revelation to John. In effect, the kingdom themes of the beginning of the Old Testament are repeated at the end in Daniel. The New Testament bookends of Matthew and Revelation effectively do the same²⁰!

The parallels between Matthew's gospel and the book of Daniel are many. Three particularly references will suffice. First, Daniel 4:35 has striking parallels with Matthew 6:10. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" is a key idea in Jesus' prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Also interesting to note, scholars who arrange the Sermon on

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition, 4th ed.*, Da 4:28, (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

¹⁸ See comments on Daniel 2:10 and 2:17 above. The golden image that Nebuchadnezzar made in Daniel 3 is a cheap earthly imitation of God's heavenly creation. "A holy one, came down from heaven" in Daniel 4:13 and "Heaven rules" in Daniel 4:26. Hamilton notes that the beast symbolism invokes the language of the Creation narrative, which further identifies the beasts with the earth. Nebuchadnezzar is made like a beast, which is to say he is sub-human. See also, N.T. Wright footnote in Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 292. "The Son of Man in Daniel 7 is in conscious contrast to the bestiality of Nebuchadnezzar."

¹⁹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 286-287.

²⁰ This idea is developed from a footnote in Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 290.

the Mount in Matthew 5-7 in a chiastic structure that points to the Lord's Prayer as the center of the sermon²¹. The center of the Sermon on the Mount is the same center as the book of Daniel!

In Matthew 13:10-15 Jesus explains to the disciples the nature of parabolic teaching. In verse 11 he says, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." The "God of heaven" in Daniel 2:27 is said to reveal the interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar²². Matthew 13:31-32 speaks of "the kingdom of heaven... becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." The language of Nebuchadnezzar's second dream in Daniel 4 is the same²³. Building upon Daniel as his primary foundation:

Matthew's favorite expression kingdom of heaven is a shorthand-joining together of the two ideas of the universal "God of heaven" with this God's coming eschatological kingdom, all the while in conscious counterpoint to the rulers of the earth.²⁴

The continuity evidenced in the broad Biblical narrative is encouraging. The God of Daniel is truly of one mind with the Jesus of the New Testament.

Conclusion: A Humble Proposal

The aim of this study seemed unattainable at the outset. With scholars like Calvin, Steinmann, Baldwin, and Keil not being convinced of Nebuchadnezzar's genuine confession of repentance (and of subsequent salvation) in Daniel 4:34-37 it seemed a fool's errand to attempt the argument. Upon having completed the study, it seems that Melancthon might have been right about this infamous Babylonian king. The author Daniel recounts the first person praise of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:34-37 with the richest biblical language and the whole of Christian Scripture, especially the disciples Matthew and John, seem to echo the praise of this true confession. Although the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar has no further witness to the life and deeds of the king, it seems plausible that this once arrogant king was finally and forcefully brought under the authority of the King of heaven. This might still be a mystery only the King of heaven can reveal at the appointed time.

²¹ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Sermon on the Mount lecture notes*, (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, January 2010).

²² Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 288.

²³ *Ibid.*, 288.

²⁴^{TheRe} *Ibid.*, 292.