

Commentary on Daniel

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Introduction to Daniel

Even before the Exodus, throughout the history of Old Testament Israel, the nation seemed never far from lapsing into idolatry. Once inside the Promised Land, the very similarities between the worship of Baal and that of Jehovah made it all too easy. It was never a case in their minds of rejecting Jehovah, but of simply adding other deities. God's claim to being the only God was a concept too alien for that people in that time; it simply did not register. Once they slipped across that line, adding a familiar worship practice of another god, it was not many steps to general idolatry and unfaithfulness.

By the time Manasseh took the throne of Judah in 696 BC, the Assyrian deportation of the Northern Kingdom was still a fresh memory. Sadly, the cautionary tale was missed, for Manasseh was the most idolatrous of Southern Kings (1 Chronicles 33). He was also the longest-lived, holding power for 55 years. By the time he came to his senses near the end of life, it was too late to undo the damage. An entire generation had sunk deeply into polytheism, to the point of shutting down the Temple worship and never reading the Torah. Indeed, no one knew where to find a copy of the Law. When the righteous boy-king Josiah came to power, and the Book of the Law was found hidden in the Temple during renovations (622 BC), its provisions and warnings shocked those who read it for the first time.

Josiah's Reforms brought a sweeping revival of faith. While we can be sure not everyone was thrilled with the shifting balance of power that must have followed such a revival, we can be sure that the large royal family and the upper nobility adopted the reforms at least superficially. Some within the elite were true believers.

Daniel was among these. While we are not told his precise lineage, we know that he was most likely of the royal household, because of what we know about ancient Babylonian Imperial policies. Shortly after Josiah's death, his successor faced the steamroller conquest of Babylon. Jeremiah had prophesied that Babylon would succeed and counseled capitulation to Babylon as the punishing hand of God – punishment in part due to the sins of Manasseh. This conquest came in 605 BC. Typical of that day and time, Babylon's imperial policy was to draft teenagers from the royal clans and finish their education in Babylonian academies to fit them for court service, just as lesser men were drafted to serve in the army.

Serving in the Imperial Babylonian Court his entire adult life, Daniel outlived the empire itself. The ruling dynasty, upon reaching the third generation, was promptly conquered by the Medo-Persian Empire. As was the norm in that day, Daniel was accepted into the service of the new rulers. Conquest was more about gaining control and tribute, not destroying and killing. The previous imperial house may have all been executed or enslaved, but everyone else willing to serve was left pretty much in place. Why waste all that training and experience? It was from this new position in the Medo-Persian Imperial Court that Daniel published this book of his experiences and prophecies.

God promised that the surviving Nation of Israel would be allowed to return to their homes, but few went. This was a direct reflection of their failure to learn from the Exile. Surely, they never again fell into the trap of idolatry, but little else changed. Already the overwhelming

emphasis on external ritual observance had begun to extinguish the spiritual fire in the hearts and minds of the people. Obeying the Law was a matter of sentiment, culture, habit, fear – but seldom again a matter of true conviction from within. There are few individual examples to the contrary. The warning of Asaph (Psalm 78) indicates it was clear long beforehand: Real obedience to God from the heart was the purpose of the Law, but was too difficult for Israel under the Covenant of Moses. Thus, Asaph promised that God would thenceforth winnow out the fakes from the faithful by using parables. Those whose hearts belonged to God would see the higher truths within parabolic language; the rest would hardly benefit from a direct and plain explanation, because they would insist on static rules and obedience to some objective standard, not loyalty to the Person of God. Only a handful of prophets after that time spoke in plain terms.

Thus, we find Daniel's prophecies buried in symbolic terms. This aspect of Semitic culture was long established before Abraham. Daniel's education was a refresher course in high Semitic literature. While a great deal of this lore has been lost to us, enough can be found to make Daniel's book serve its purpose. Further, we understand generally what it must have meant to the immediate target audience. The Post-Exile Nation of Israel was primarily an incubator for the Messiah. That they rejected Him when eventually He appeared was merely a symptom of the same disease that placed Daniel in Babylon – corrupting the image that God revealed of Himself with something lesser. The nation whose existence was supposed to have been a reflection of God's glorious revelation had rarely come close to their mission, and failed utterly to spread His message to other nations (see Jonah and Isaiah 59:14-17 for examples). Indeed, they had rejected that task so completely that they would reject the message itself in the person of Christ. Daniel knew it was coming, and this hideous truth must have torn at Daniel's soul.

Chapter 1

To say God chose Daniel for a unique task is an understatement. Had there been no Babylon, he'd have been a giant among men in Judea, figuratively, and perhaps somewhat literally. We have ample evidence he bore a genius-level intellect, but as a son of royalty or upper nobility, he would have been physically larger than average. Peasants throughout history suffered mild to severe malnutrition, and were generally smaller than the well-fed privileged classes. Further, it's almost certain he had already received extensive martial training. Most importantly, he was a moral and spiritual giant. God had prepared Daniel's soul to fulfill a role for which he is still famous today, but was even more famous during his lifetime.

Just a few years previously, King Josiah had gone out to do battle against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. Pharaoh was marching along the coast of Palestine on the way to face Babylon, the former tributary of Assyria. Pharaoh was a faithful ally of Assyria and sought to restore the empire to Nineveh. He had no interest in Josiah, but once the latter was killed and his troops scattered, Judah became a tributary of Egypt. Pharaoh replaced Josiah's successor with a brother eager to please him, Jehoiakim. In 608 BC, the new king returned to Jerusalem with orders to collect a massive tribute, bankrupting the little kingdom, to support Pharaoh's battle against Nebuchadnezzar far to the north at Carchemish. Pharaoh was defeated and the army of

Babylon eventually rolled through Judea on the way south to Egypt, taking portions of the royal household and some upper nobility as hostage against Jehoiakim's good behavior.

Thus, in 605 BC, Daniel found himself in the entourage of royal hostages sent to Babylon. We should not imagine this as chains and abuse, but not necessarily plush treatment, either. Still, royalty of any nation was treated with respect befitting their class until they rebelled. Daniel and his relatives were not hustled off in a forced march, but took a few months at least, traveling by wagons. Along with the people was a majority of the Temple treasures, especially the gold and gold-plated furnishings. In Babylon, the people were probably kept in a quarter of the city designed to accommodate dignitaries from across the empire. The emperor of any nation would naturally desire to enlarge his court with the best of foreign servants, if for no other reason than to have the service of people with no possible local political loyalties against him. Also, the more exotic the mix, the greater the ruler's grandeur.

The order was given to sift through the hostages of Judea for young men who looked regal and could absorb the academic training necessary for court service. Daniel and his friends were the best qualified. Given new names somewhat parallel to their original Hebrew names, either in meaning or in sound, their new identities were a dramatic departure from their former lives. They would have been about 15, as this was the age when a privileged lad had gained the full flower of early manhood, and would not lose much when castrated. Given the man appointed to this task, named by his title as Chief of Eunuchs, we are foolish to think Daniel and his friends were not made eunuchs themselves. This ancient custom was more than the obvious matter of trusting men as harem guards, though it began there. Rather, it symbolized far more. Pertinent here is to note that it made a man trustworthy for the most private matters of the Emperor's household, an elevation in social rank just short of the princes in the realm.

The training was to focus on Chaldean literature and history. The name "Chaldean" was an ancient term derived from the region – Chaldees or Chaldea. The language was similar to Hebrew. Oddly, it was a return to the language of Abraham, also called today Aramaic or Syriac. Classical Hebrew was closer to the language of Canaanites. Somewhere far back in ancient Mesopotamia, there arose a class of priestly princes. They were highly cultured and educated, and gave themselves to the biggest field of research of those times: the study of various religions. We recognize Balaam as among them, as well as the Magi seeking Jesus. Succeeding waves of conquerors adopted the heritage of these men and their academies as their own, with massive funding to underwrite construction of libraries and translations of every legend available, recorded on clay tablets in cuneiform. While Daniel and his friends would learn to read and write Chaldean, the purpose was to become fully acquainted with this body of literature, with large doses of astrology, black magic, and proto-science, along with legends gleaned from every culture and ethnic group conquered by every empire in turn.

Under the tutelage of Josiah's reforms from birth, Daniel was determined to remain as faithful to his God as he could. This was not about fighting, but about winning by taking upon himself the burden of proof. His faith was sufficient to press the matter, but quite willing to accept failure if Jehovah did not grant them favor. While there is little of the food and wine itself which threatened their purity, it was that both meat and wine were offered first to pagan gods before seeing the Emperor's kitchen. Massive quantities of this food kept a whole cadre of pagan

priests busy each day in preparation for all the hundreds, perhaps thousands, who “dined from the king’s table,” as it were. The meats would have been as varied as any could imagine, but all would have been offered first to idols. The wine would have been fermented as often in temples as anywhere else. Thus, Daniel and his friends chose the one sort of food that escaped such handling: things that were served fresh as harvested. The term would include anything grown from seeds and picked or cut, with little further processing, such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, grains, and the like. All of these were kosher. God blessed this choice in a test, to make them appear healthier by Babylonian standards than all the rest of the students.

Upon their personal interview before the Emperor, these four stood out. We should read the description as standard Semitic superlatives, rather than a precise description. The language of the text is designed to make us feel that we are there, to experience it for ourselves, rather than to provide a detailed explanation. The narrative conjures a vision of Jehovah watching over these four young men, seeing to it that they prospered and brought to their calling a background and commitment lacking in all the other students from the other exotic places around the empire. Viewing all things in light of the Lord’s revelation imparts a far wiser understanding, a better grasp of what matters. God had plans for these boys. At the same time, it indicated He had a strong interest in Babylon’s health and prosperity, at least for a time. As it turns out, Daniel managed to serve the entire Exile Period, and was taken into the service of the Medo-Persian conquerors some 70 years later.

Chapter 2

It becomes obvious from the text that Daniel’s final published work is a selective collection of things he wrote, or perhaps dictated to a scribe. Referring to himself in the third person was hardly inconsistent with literary practices of those times. At the point in verse 4 where Daniel mentions the Chaldeans speaking in the official court language of Aramaic, our copies of this text shift from Hebrew to Aramaic writing. It continues until the end of the historical accounts, and shifts back to Hebrew in the second half of this book for the visions and prophecies. It’s hard to know exactly why, but an obvious guess would be that the Aramaic portion was composed first, and then the prophecies. Daniel then collected all the material together in a single volume, adding the introductory material in Hebrew.

The point of this chapter is primarily for Daniel to confess his complete and utter reliance in faith on Jehovah. It also indicates how Daniel and his friends rose from their low starting positions in the court hierarchy to prominence within the empire. Daniel is clearly one of the few figures in Hebrew history to rise above mere obedience in the Law of Moses to the higher calling of faith and trust in a God who was Himself far above such things. Where the Law had an obvious application, Daniel obeyed because of His faith. Where mere observance of ritual requirements could not answer the need of the moment, Daniel’s faith made it possible to see in wisdom what God had intended.

Some have supposed that Nebuchadnezzar forgot this troubling dream. While possible, it makes little sense in the story from an Eastern viewpoint. Rather, we should gather from the scant clues here a picture of Nebuchadnezzar pondering deep and puzzling issues. While Daniel in chapter 1 referred to him as “King of Babylon” at the time of the conquest of

Jerusalem, it seems that was simply noting his eventual ascension to the throne some years later. Many ancient cultures called for the heir to a throne to earn respect by leading the battles for his reigning father. In this case, Nabopolassar was the original ruler of Babylon in rising up against his former master, Assyria. He dispatched his son, Nebuchadnezzar, as general of forces on other fronts while Nabopolassar led the mopping up of the old Assyrian imperial core cities.

One of those foreign campaigns led by Nebuchadnezzar netted Daniel and his friends, among a large retinue of royal Judean hostages. At some point, Nabopolassar died, and his son spent some time consolidating his position. There was a period of co-regency, a very common practice, and perhaps Daniel prefers to date things from the actual official solitary rule of his master. At any rate, the Emperor was clearly a man of tremendous intellect himself, and the available historical evidence supports this. Now ruling alone, he ponders things of great importance to himself and his empire. He no doubt recognizes many of his court counselors are charlatans and yes-men. How can he hope to rule with such advisers? A test of their supposed divine powers was in order. Thus, he demanded they tell him his dream.

A very troubling dream it was, indeed. It addressed things pertaining to his ruminations about the affairs of men and empires. It's quite possible he recognized the meaning himself, to some degree, but the whole experience was quite disturbing. Calling his large and varied staff of counselors, magicians, soothsayers, etc. – the terms are not meant too precisely – he presented his demand. Normally they would listen, and then compare the narrative with a large collection of clay tablets with lists of omens and symbols. Quite likely it's the sort of detailed digging Daniel and his friends would be assigned as neophytes to the craft. The advisers were dumbfounded when Nebuchadnezzar demanded they tell him the dream, too. His accusation is based on an understanding of astrology, a key element in religious matters since at least the time of Nimrod many thousands of years earlier in that area. If they delayed long enough, the astrological signs would change, and the meaning of the dream would be lost. His threat would seem to have been a part of his plan all along. When the matter was ended, the captain of the Imperial Bodyguard began organizing the task. This was no small matter, for they all had to be found and it would take several days. Whatever it was Nebuchadnezzar understood from his dream seemed to call for some truly dramatic changes in the way he ruled.

Obviously, none of these advisers were executed before they got to Daniel, but it was close. With all the composure of a man who valued faith above his own life, he asked the captain why the decree was so urgent. Executions normally were not summary with this class of people, but allowed adequate time for the settlement of a man's personal affairs, probably a week or more. The reply was something Daniel knew his God could handle. Isaiah predicted Daniel's service in the Imperial Court (2 Kings 20:18), several generations before Daniel was born. We aren't told how he persuaded the Emperor to wait, and the drama could also be part of the ruler's plan, though Daniel seems not to know of it. Either way, it was certainly God's plan. Returning to their quarters, Daniel shared his convictions with his friends, and they sought the Lord's face together. If the Lord intended to use them, He would find a way to spare them.

Daniel received a replay of the dream in his own dream, as well as what to him was the obvious meaning. His hymn of praise deserves its own book, but he clearly contrasts Jehovah as the real God in the context of confused Chaldean flummery and guesswork. Being a generous man

servicing a generous God, Daniel made it the first order of business that morning to save the wise men with whom he had many and profound differences, along with saving himself and his friends. The captain immediately brought him before the Emperor, taking advantage of his position to solve a major crisis. To the Emperor's query, Daniel was careful to establish that he operated from a different basis than the other wise men and relied on none of their tricks to keep others in the dark. Instead, he was open and honest, deflecting glory from himself, pointing it to his God instead.

The vision of the statue revealed more to Daniel than it did to Nebuchadnezzar. While the Emperor was absorbed in issues of this world on a large scale, Daniel saw a dramatic change in things for his nation, and for the Covenant. While the man of men, king of earthly kings, received a more or less plain description of succeeding empires – the head of gold, the Medo-Persians the upper body of silver, the bronze of Alexander's Macedonian conquest, and the iron of Rome – he was unable to give much detail about the final, ultimate Kingdom established without human hands, a Kingdom built by God. However, the Hebrew reader who knew the Word would immediately see what Daniel left cloaked from those without God.

We lack sufficient archaeological details to fill out the picture. However, we know Daniel's own assessment of his master was honestly high. He states that Nebuchadnezzar was justly ruler of all known kingdoms; Daniel was courtly, but did not engage in flattery. The next empire would be stronger, but somehow less noble, and the next even less so. Finally, Rome's rule would be the strongest ever, yet with little real moral value. In the end, that would allow for common folks to gain the authority, though they could never have the intrinsic greatness of any ruler before them. In Daniel's mind, the measure of moral greatness was the acknowledgement of the ineffable Spirit Realm, and humility before it. Each succeeding empire would be less and less humble before the higher powers.

To this day, we see the result of commoners ruling in the feet of hard iron power mixed with a complete lack of any noble character. This is not about royal or noble blood compared to peasant DNA, but about the character and wisdom of those who rule. Tragic though this loss has been, it meant for Daniel and his nation that they no longer had any real significance in God's plan as a free and independent people. They would never be truly free again.

However, God Himself would displace this with a Kingdom that did not rely on humanity. It would crush the entire history of noble human rule by raising a far higher standard, an impossible, inhuman standard of holiness. This new Kingdom would make all the rest insignificant, because this final empire would rest on faith alone. It was heartening to see that God would not let things rest with the mongrelized rule of democracy, a rule of force without any redeeming graces; it was saddening for Daniel to see nothing in this vision of his people, only His God. We aren't told how Daniel responded to the worship directly from the man on the throne, but we know it vaulted him to the forefront of Babylonian imperial politics. Yet he never let it go to his head, and never forgot the veiled meaning of the parabolic warning of future things, as more visions were added to it later in his career.

Meanwhile, he was promoted to governor of the royal district, the personal domain of the Imperial family. Daniel in turn asked for his friends to be deputized to oversee daily affairs

while Daniel remained on duty in the court. The Aramaic text offers the image of “sitting at the gate” as a way of indicating Daniel was a chief counsel, for the gates were the meeting place where judges heard disputes and other legal business was formalized. In modern terms, Daniel literally stood near the throne, a trusted and close confidant. He was also promoted to the head of all the wise men. This was galling to men much older and more established, and their conniving ways later prove that they were lesser men than their savior, but unable to foil God’s plans.

We must note at this point that the writers of ancient times, such as Daniel, assume what would be common knowledge for their readers. The secular historical information of this period is highly confusing and spotty. It’s possible we really don’t have a clue, and some of the historical background is mistaken. This does not really change the story itself. Assuming the worst, we would find only that we had misidentified characters peripheral to the narrative. We can be sure Nebuchadnezzar led a Babylonian army to Jerusalem more than once, and Daniel calls him “king.” There are great and many questions whether he was the first or second to wear that name, and whether he was actually the son of Nabopolassar, but not the father of Nabonidus, nor grandfather of Belshazzar. These questions do not affect the events of Daniel’s life, nor their meaning to our faith.

Chapter 3

That Nebuchadnezzar was a brilliant man did not prevent him being an idolater. The world in which he was born was filled with numerous gods and goddesses. While he did seem to favor a few over the rest, he could not have conceived of the possibility that there was but one and the rest were fake. Even Israel seemed to struggle with that notion until the Exile. Further, his declaration at the end of this episode, granting the God of Israel protection from blasphemy and scorn had nothing to do with his pagan beliefs. Many gods and religions were so protected, according to archaeological evidence. However, in the polytheistic ancient world, people commonly assumed all gods were probably valid, but the gods of one’s nation and household were given greater attention. You most certainly could bring your own gods from home when, as a foreigner, you were brought into Imperial service in Babylon. However, as with all rulers in those days, Nebuchadnezzar considered it a servant’s feudal duty to worship his gods, too. Even if only to humor him, doing any less was considered a form of treason and few would balk.

The few who balked at such polytheistic practices were the three close friends of Daniel: Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego, as they were known by their Babylonian names. In keeping with their previous efforts to remain faithful to Jehovah, they at least rejected the notion they could worship other gods, whether real or imagined.

We aren’t told where this fits in with the chronology, and there’s no reason to assume anything about that. Nor are we told where Daniel was when this happened, because he’s not in the picture. We are told simply that there was a time when Nebuchadnezzar had an image constructed that was quite large and it was plated with gold. To envision something so large cast in pure gold would be quite unreasonable, especially given the known practices of the day. Nor should we imagine that the basic material was stone. It was brick, or perhaps wood and

brick. In the area around ancient Babylon, since as far back as the first Babylon under Nimrod, the only building material available was clay fired in ovens to make bricks, and held together by petroleum tar. The entire city was built of such material. The image could have been anything, and was likely a brick column, with perhaps something mounted on top to represent any of Nebuchadnezzar's favored deities.

The dedication ceremony called for every available official in the area of the city that day to appear. As servants of their emperor, they were to give the appropriate honors to his deity. The signal to prostrate themselves before the idol was the sound of a symphony orchestra, composed of every musical instrument known at that time, including a few borrowed from far distant lands. Some of the instruments are listed with their Greek names because they hadn't been seen in Babylon long enough to have a local name. Apparently, everyone did their duty.

However, the Chaldean magi had a complaint. Naturally, this was after they were nearly destroyed and were saved by Daniel. Wholly ungrateful, they made note to the Emperor that Daniel's three friends did not bow before the image. His anger was typical of rulers detecting treason in his high officials. Feeling somewhat indebted to them, he gave them another chance. Their answer was that he shouldn't go to so much trouble, because it wouldn't change anything. The narrative shows them as plain speaking, without all the empty adulation that seemed to irritate rulers of intelligence, even if it was proper protocol. Thus, they weren't disrespectful; they simply got to the point directly without using go-betweens. They weren't going to give honor and glory to any other god but Jehovah. It didn't matter if it cost their lives, nor how horrible such a death might be. If it mattered to Him, their God could save them, or let them toast as He pleased. The point was not lost on Nebuchadnezzar that they considered Jehovah above his gods.

The brick kilns of Babylon had developed over several thousand years at this point. They were quite large, and evidence indicates most of them were round, partially sunk into the earth, and made of several layers of brick themselves. There was a single side door, and entering meant stepping down a way. Fresh clay blocks were taken inside, arranged in stacks along the walls. The center was an oven or a fire pit, with a chimney above that. The fire was stoked, the door sealed, and the flames allowed to burn down, most likely overnight. As soon as it was cooled down enough, the door was unsealed, and the finished bricks hauled out. To use these ovens as a means of execution is hardly surprising, given Babylonian brutality.

With such a direct answer, the Emperor was hotter in temper than the oven. If nothing else, it was deeply embarrassing for such protected officials to defy him publicly. He ordered the slaves to build a fire "seven times hotter" than normal, but we would be fools to think this is a literal expression, as if they had some means to measure the temperature accurately. Seven was a number symbolizing sacredness in a very broad sense, and these men were being offered to the god they had offended. Further, they were not stripped as most victims, but bundled up in ropes fully clothed, including their turbans. The command to throw them in fell on captains who were over the guards that normally executed this duty, symbolizing the utter necessity of it being done right. By getting close enough to toss them in, the captains died from heat exposure. That is, they swooned from the heat, and no one could get to them before they died, because the

heat was too intense. It suggests the side door was used, and left open. Without a load of bricks to bake, the men slid down to the fire itself.

No one knows how much time passed before Nebuchadnezzar looked to see, but it seems to have been rather soon. Perhaps this situation called for watching the victims incinerate, as a sort of ceremonial overabundance of effort to insure they did, indeed, die. They didn't. From his seat far enough away to be safe, but still close enough to watch, he noticed the men were unbound, alive, and not alone. He asked his advisers to make sure he wasn't seeing a vision. The term he used to describe the fourth character inside was common to that culture as anyone clearly not human, but above that. A Babylonian would call any angelic being the same thing, and it might be used of exceptional men. Insisting we see it as a theophany of Jesus Christ is bad theology and silly pietism, because it would have had no meaning to Nebuchadnezzar, the one who needed the lesson here.

This sight so amazed Nebuchadnezzar that he stood up and walked toward the kiln as close as he dared go. Calling out to those inside, he asked them by the name of their God, as he knew it, to come back out. Do not miss the point that he humbles himself before that God. They clambered out unharmed. Aside from the lack of bonds, they were completely untouched by the fire, nor so much as smelled of smoke. Nebuchadnezzar then publicly confessed the greatness of a God who could do such a thing. He declared their religion protected by the throne. Never again would they have to find ways to get around Imperial policies contrary to the Law of Moses. They were exempt. Further, no one in the empire was allowed to disparage this religion. This would forever shut up Chaldean magi in their carping about the Judean upstarts. At this point, it is safe to say Nebuchadnezzar gave Jehovah an honored place in his pantheon. His later actions indicate little more, but at least that much.

In the end, the magi were frustrated. Not only did they fail to get rid of these three, but also the men were promoted even higher above them. We don't hear from the trio again. We are left with an image of men who prospered and did not face any more hassles.

Chapter 4

Where the capital city of Babylon once stood is today a semi-desert, sandy, yet sometimes a swampy flat plain. Irrigation at times throughout history could make the area lush with fields of grain and vegetables. In the days of Daniel, a common sight would be onions and barley. The latter was mostly because the demand for year-round crops via irrigation had raised the salt content of the soil, so wheat didn't grow well; barley was more tolerant. Stones were rare, but clay for bricks had been abundant for thousands of years. Nebuchadnezzar's kilns had been busy with bricks more than for executions. We find that they had begun mixing colors into the clay, as well as glazing, to produce bricks with various tints, blue being quite dominant in Imperial building projects.

While this has perhaps been one of the easiest places on earth for man to prosper in a sedentary settlement, and is reputed as the birthplace of civilization and settled living, men brought to this area an unspoken assumption that their gods were best met at the tops of mountains. Since there were none in the area, they built mountains artificially of bricks. Ziggurats, the brick

pyramids of the Mesopotamian Valley, were everywhere. They were generally aligned for use in marking astrological observations and events. The stars themselves were believed to be the physical manifestations of gods, with varying ranks and classes in a system we hardly comprehend today. Nebuchadnezzar's capital city was a massive pile of bricks, visible for miles around in the flat plains. His palace included several pagan shrines with a network of terraces and high brick towers, from which descended the famous Hanging Gardens. In these sandy plains of muted yellow, the palace appeared as a mountain, brightly colored and shining in the sun, draped in glorious green.

Such sights inspired a seemingly justified awe at the man who stood in the center of all these things. Not only a builder and designer, but the brilliant ruler also managed to vanquish all the armies he met in battle, commanding his troops himself. Yet he was a literate man, apparently conversant in several languages. We would today easily rank him among the grandest geniuses, and Daniel's admiration was fully justified. Yet for all this, a heathen outlook darkened his life, loaded with superstition. It is apparent that this chapter of Daniel was taken directly from the Imperial archives, a declaration of Nebuchadnezzar himself, written in the first person. The tone and figures of speech retain a pantheistic assumption, even while he confesses Jehovah as God above all gods.

Rather late in his reign as best we can tell, we find that the relative absence of official Imperial records for this period rather supports this narrative. To admit the emperor suffered this event would be contrary to politically correct views of that time and place, and would explain why he felt it was necessary to produce this personal decree. It may also explain why it survives only in Daniel's book. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and it was obvious to him it was no idle sifting of the brain's memories, but a portent of the future. The dream was troubling, because whatever it meant, it was not a hopeful image. After consulting the usual crowd of magi, with no useful answer, he called Daniel and related his dream.

Nebuchadnezzar refers to Daniel in the same pagan frame of reference he apparently carried to the grave, for he seems to have died not long after this story and this decree. We know from archeology that Nebuchadnezzar dearly loved the great cedars of Lebanon, and had personally supervised the felling of a great many for hauling to his palace. In his dream stood such a great tree, a common symbol of rulers since ancient times. Brutal though he may have been in battle, as ruler he was truly a regal, even imperial kind of man. People who were loyal to his rule did, indeed, prosper quite well. Even the exiled Judeans living in the shadow of his capital were getting quite wealthy and comfortable. Into this scene came one from above. We would know this as an angel, but to Nebuchadnezzar, it was a demigod at least, one of the stars of the sky.

The decree from this divine being was to cut down the magnificent tree, and drive away all who prospered in its shadow. The log would be trimmed, the leaves pulled, and the fruit scattered. The stump would be preserved, but bound with fetters and left alone in the fields. Then, the voice said it would live on grass, rest in the open at night, and live as an animal. This would continue for an undefined period of sevens, symbolic of an offering to the gods. While it's possible this meant years, it need not be so, and to demand such a meaning would miss the point. It was long enough for his place to be nearly forgotten.

Daniel was stunned. Since time was never measured in increments less than an hour, the phrase would certainly mean somewhat less of a period, but long enough to alarm Nebuchadnezzar. To Daniel it was all too obvious. His master demanded an answer, regardless of the consequences. In a day and age when bringing bad news to the throne was often to carry one's death warrant, the Emperor essentially told Daniel not to worry about such consequences, because the interpretation was too important. Daniel somberly noted the dream was a dream to his enemies, but a nightmare for Nebuchadnezzar.

The majestic beginning of the image noted the glory of Babylon and her ruler. It was not so long ago Nebuchadnezzar had finally pacified Syria, Judea, Egypt, Persia and everything within reach of his troops. With peace came trade and prosperity as never before. The recent additions to the palace, the splendid avenue down the city center and fortifications throughout the empire were beyond comparison with the contemptible and primitive constructions of previous civilizations in that valley. People were genuinely doing well.

But all this was from the hand of Daniel's God. He granted it freely and could as easily take it away. This He promised to do. The Emperor would be driven insane, apparently a form of lycanthropy, but instead of a wolf, seeing himself as a goat. We believe a similar malady affected Nabonidus, his successor. This madness would have the man thinking himself an animal, living out of doors and acting wildly. But it was not the end. The band of iron and bronze was as much protective as confining. When the time was passed, and the man came to himself, he would come to Jehovah. Still, this was an awful thing, and it could probably be avoided. Daniel's urging was for Nebuchadnezzar to become righteous under Noah's Covenant. In the context, the meaning is a call to become humble, to limit his pride and show compassion to those less fortunate. In short, Daniel warned Nebuchadnezzar to keep in mind he was just a short step from being a destitute nobody himself.

A year later, as the Emperor strolled on the upper terraces of his magnificent palace, he was seized by a powerful pride that all this was the product of his efforts, a testimony to his personal greatness. No sooner had he said it than a voice from Heaven reminded him that he had been warned, and now the doom was upon him. He had failed to humble himself and acknowledge it was the God of Israel that delivered Israel into his hands, along with every other kingdom and empire.

While we can be sure that Nebuchadnezzar was given preferential treatment by letting him loose in an Imperial park, this would be pretty much the same for any favored patient – put them in a safe asylum and hope for the best. One of his sons held regency on his behalf, but not a single courtier came to visit him. The man wallowed in the grass, slept on the ground and completely let himself go with matted hair and beard, long filthy nails, etc. These two items were of particular note in a culture where men fussed over having the most carefully curled hair and clean hands. Such were the marks of privilege, education and refined manners. At the end of his time, Nebuchadnezzar came to his senses and immediately gave the glory to Jehovah.

It appears Nebuchadnezzar became a genuine convert, insofar as it was possible. We reasonably doubt he began attending synagogue, but certainly made Jehovah his chief deity. Near as we can tell, this all came just before his death. The records from the end of his reign are scant.

However, the narrative tells us he died in the former comfort and luxury of his Imperial majesty. Things were altogether unsettled after his passing. None of those following had anything like his grand stature in intellect, character, and certainly not his late-found devotion to Jehovah.

Chapter 5

From the previous chapter, we allow several decades to slide past. It was a confused time following the death of Nebuchadnezzar, according to historical evidence gleaned from other sources. The great ruler's son is assassinated, a usurper holds power briefly, and passes it to a son who reigns but days. He is in turn killed by Nabonidus, whom we believe was a brother-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar. This man in turn runs off to Arabia for a number of years, leaving things in the hands of his son and declared co-regent, Belshazzar. Thus, it appears that the ruler at the time this chapter opens is legally the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, the Crown Prince (second in power) serving as regent.

This man seems to possess no part of his grandfather's greatness. He would surely have read the previous chapter in the form of Imperial Archives. Even his father, Nabonidus, holds valid honor for actual battle accomplishments, but Belshazzar has nothing of his own. Since he could not obtain real honor, perhaps it was in an attempt to endear himself to his satraps that he put on an unspeakably lavish feast for them in the palace at Babylon. Further, he tossed aside all custom, bringing in wives and concubines and allowing himself to be seen without the customary screen separating him from all but the closest advisers. As if this were not shocking enough, he ordered brought in the various vessels of worship from the temples of gods taken from the various nations conquered by Babylon. They were used to toast the pantheon of Babylonian deities.

Our best understanding indicates that at this point in time, invaders were already inside the gates of the city. With the palace so very wrapped up in celebration, so completely insulated from the city below the lush Hanging Gardens, that those in the banquet hall were oblivious. Even worse, they were utterly oblivious to the very God they were insulting in their ritual mockery. Let it not be forgotten that this act was patently illegal by Nebuchadnezzar's own proclamation, noted by Daniel at the end of chapter 3.

To ensure the full meaning of God's wrath not be lost on the merrymakers, a hand appears and writes something on the wall. This would have been a brick wall covered with plaster, upon which any number of decorative images of Babylon's pagan gods and imperial symbols were painted in lavish colors. In the direct glow from the burning lampstand, perhaps the hand simply scratched away the bright color to reveal a glaring white script in the plaster. As was common then, the writing was right-to-left, using only the consonants of the words, and apparently adopting a style of lettering unfamiliar to those in Babylon. The mighty prince-regent wilts into panic like a small boy. The entire party switched from riotous celebration to raucous panic.

As with all omens, it was assumed that the magi could explain what this was. We get the feeling they had reasserted themselves over Daniel and his friends. Indeed, the Hebrew men would be

quite aged now, along with having fallen from favor over the past few decades of rapid and tumultuous change in Imperial administration. Belshazzar's bold offer of elevating to a position directly under him was not sufficient to overcome the Magi's obvious lack of comprehension. Best we can tell, the magi had long held the descendants of Abraham in contempt. Abraham had departed the great and marvelous Valley of Civilization when called by some mad god or another to become a filthy tent-dweller. These tent-dwellers adopted the Canaanite language, which eventually matured into what we call Ancient Hebrew. Though rather closely related to Chaldean, it was despised along with the God of whom that language spoke. Only a few rare individual magi in history knew much about the Hebrew God, or the language of His worshippers. The squarish script of Hebrew writing was foreign to them, contrasting to their rounded version. Even then, the words had no meaning to them.

As all in the banquet hall began to despair, the Queen Mother came to see what all the commotion was. She knew Daniel was highly respected for good reason, and recommended he be called from retirement to handle this problem. She reminded Belshazzar that it was his own predecessor, calling Nebuchadnezzar his "father" in typical courtly language, who had made this man the highest ranking of all magi. It might not be unfair to suggest that she was gently chiding him for his foolish negligence regarding custom and history. Oddly, Daniel's appointed name was about the same as the prince-regent's.

Daniel was called in and Belshazzar was rather solicitous in his request. He repeated his extravagant offer if Daniel could read and interpret the message. Daniel wasn't being rude in his answer, but direct. He had already read the message, knew what it meant and had probably long ago discerned that the wrath of God was on its way. He first gave the context of Nebuchadnezzar's greatness and the cause for it. He also recounted the episode of madness and how it ended, reminding Belshazzar of the Imperial decree that resulted. The Most High God was not merely a national deity of the Hebrews, but the One True God. It was this God Belshazzar had blasphemed.

On the face of it, the writing was simply a list of Hebrew names for coins. However, those names were related to words for measurements of various kinds, and those words were the point of the message. The Hebrew *mina* was 50 shekels, and was related to the word meaning "counting, numbering, measuring." Using it twice makes it emphatic. The word *tekell* was simply an alternate spelling of *shekel*, related to the word for weighing something. The word *peres* (often printed as *upharsin*) was the name for a half-shekel, used in the Temple Tax (Exodus 30:11-16). It came from the word for "divide." Thus, Belshazzar was told that God had examined Babylon under Belshazzar, weighing him against the standards of Nebuchadnezzar, and found him utterly lacking. Thus, his regency would end in conquest by the Medo-Persian forces already rampaging across the empire.

Though it was utterly pointless, Belshazzar kept his promise. For once in his life, he recognized the ultimate truth of things. The Medo-Persian forces, we are told, marched into Babylon under the water gates of the Euphrates, which they had diverted from its course previously. That very night, Belshazzar was executed, but we know that Daniel was spared. As the battles continued, the control of the Imperial Palace district was given to someone Daniel calls Darius. While we find no other record of that name at that time, it hardly matters. The point is that the name is

clearly drawn from the royal family of the Medes, and may well have been a common name, or used simply as a title. This, in a day and age when changing a man's name was quite common, often for causes we find perplexing in our modern Western world. Belshazzar died; Daniel survived and continued to play a vital role in God's plans.

Chapter 6

The Medes and Persians were once servants of the Assyrians. Then, they were allies of Babylon in revolt against Assyria, led by Nabopolassar. During their period of independence, they united under the vision of Cyrus. He was Persian and it serves best to think of his home kingdom as roughly equivalent to modern Iran, though mostly an area east of the Zagros Mountains, which mountains formed the eastern high wall of the Mesopotamian Valley. The vision of Cyrus was largely fired by his Zoroastrian religion. While possessed of a distinct collection of legends, this was a broadly syncretistic faith; all other gods were associates of Ahuramazda, and most were his friends. However, the Persian rulers developed a taste for being treated as semi-divine, and the Medes picked up on it. The two kingdoms united by intermarriage, with various treaties to prevent unfair treatment, calling for a rotating throne, and so forth.

It seems to make better sense if we see the Darius in this chapter as the immediate ruler (the Hebrew word for "king" is quite elastic in meaning) of the Babylonian district, that large flat plain at the lower end of the valley, over which the twin rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates wandered slowly. Thus, Darius appointed 120 ministers over this rather large and wealthy district. That he would employ Daniel should surprise no one. This was the man who was originally chosen by Nebuchadnezzar, in part because as a foreigner he had no local political interest. As a major figure in Babylonian administration, his fame spread to Imperial allies, including the Medes and Persians. At least one Imperial edict named him specifically (ch. 4). It's quite likely they knew of his prophecy regarding their conquest of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar's dream in ch. 2). How could they *not* want to use his wise counsel? In this case, the narrative mentions a concern for the royal treasury – that the king's interests suffer no loss. We know from hints here and in Esther that the Medo-Persians gave much concern to monetary profit, and the rulers were as much businessmen as warriors. Many decrees included considerations of expense and profit. Apparently, Daniel was exceptionally suited for this position of trust, and any audits showed him utterly faithful in handling the King's resources.

The nature of the minister's resentment is not stated, though the context hints that they found it hard to embezzle with Daniel watching. It appears even Zoroastrian religious concerns included profit as a major consideration, based on assumptions that the gods would reward them financially. When they brought their bogus petition to Darius, we must assume it included a profit motive. Darius was obviously a better man, not a gold-digger. His concerns would be more about enriching the throne as an office, not himself. Since almost every pagan ritual of prayer and petition meant bringing an offering, he was being asked to kick off his administration with a boost in income to the throne. It was no different from a conquest tribute.

Such concerns were wasted on those who served Jehovah, and it wouldn't be hard for the ministers to find this out from the Chaldean records on religions, if they cared to research it.

Daniel's prayer habits were in direct obedience to 2 Chronicles 6:36-39, where Solomon predicted such an exile, and asked Jehovah to regard the prayers of the faithful. Facing Jerusalem was not physically necessary, but a symbolic act. Daniel was neither hiding from nor mocking the edict. When the ministers brought this violation to the attention of Darius, he was visibly perturbed, but backed into the proverbial corner. Those who should have informed him of the implications of such an edict instead hid it from him, because he had no intimate knowledge of Daniel's religion, yet. The legal customs of the Persians were a bit fairer than the Babylonian model of absolute monarchy without limits. It constrained the rulers personally, because they couldn't unilaterally rescind edicts of this class. Something like this would require the consent and review of the nobles involved in supporting it. For all his efforts to negotiate a change, Darius failed to persuade them to rescind it.

For the Zoroastrians, fire was sacred, not to be used in torture or execution. Even today we know they expose their dead to carrion eaters, so it's no surprise animals figured large in execution. Lacking the rocky caves and pits of their homeland, they probably converted an old clay pit to the purpose. From what we can discern today, it would have been ringed with a wall, over which witnesses could see. At one end of such a pit would be a removable stone that opened onto a long, slimy clay slide. Neither lions nor humans could turn and scramble back up this slope very far, or for very long. Perhaps the efforts of victims and predators would serve to entertain some watching. However, the final commitment of Daniel to this fate took place after dark, so no witnesses stayed. The stone was sealed in place so that no rescue was possible by human hands. However, Darius was devout enough about religion to be certain that whatever God Daniel served was more than able to rescue him. He offered in essence his blessing in that name of that God.

For Darius, this could easily have been the worst night of his life. He hurried out at dawn and would have called out in a high-pitched, plaintive voice. Daniel answered and his survival could only be seen as proof he was not guilty. Thus, he was falsely accused, and his accusers were required to pass the same test. While we grimace at the idea of tossing in family members, even Israel carried out similar punishments. Some crimes were such a threat to *shalom* that the man was held responsible for corrupting his own household in the process. There was also the practical consideration that surviving children might feel obliged to seek vengeance later. At any rate, these false accusers hardly reached the bottom before lions pounced, thus proving even more strongly that Daniel's survival was a miracle of his God. To prevent any chance of a replay, Darius promptly issued an edict that officially placed Jehovah among the closest friends of Ahuramazda.

We would miss much if we ignored how this narrative is closely related to the next chapter. Nebuchadnezzar was the soul of the Babylonian Empire. Daniel indicates that he was truly regal of character and intellect. His successors shared little of that, and Babylon fell to a less noble empire. In our Western minds we would be troubled by the absolute power held by Babylon's rulers, and would be slightly more comfortable with the shared power system in Medo-Persia. With that shared power comes the birth of bureaucracy, which is fundamentally the enemy of humanity – bureaucracy demands maximum dehumanizing conformity. In that sense, something truly great passed from the scene of humanity, for it ended with the most

bureaucratic empire of all, Rome. All modern governments simply vary the flavor of the crushing Roman-style bureaucracy, and precious few genuine monarchs since Nebuchadnezzar were truly great men. For the sake of the Nation of Israel, Rome was the end of the line.

Even though Cyrus was solicitous in returning the Jews to their home, few went. For one thing, far too many adopted the religion-wealth nexus of the Zoroastrians, and mixed it into their understanding of the Messianic Expectations. Hebrew culture, as a branch of Eastern Mysticism, with all its use of paradox and symbolic logic, essentially died in Babylon, and never recovered. It opened the door to receiving the corrupting influence of Greek linear rationalism and abstract logic. While in one sense the Lord had relented and allowed the rebuilding of the Temple and worship, Israel never again understood properly what they were doing as a nation. Surely a few prophets and leaders saw clearly, but their influence was eclipsed by the exotic elements of Zoroastrianism, and visions of “paradise” (a Persian concept) on earth. Thus, the Nation of Israel corrects one mistake: They never again allow themselves to slip into idolatry. However, they make a much greater mistake of never again understanding their God, but twist all His commands and warnings into a materialist mess, taking them ever farther from their original Old Testament faith. Much of what follows in Daniel’s prophet visions will be horribly misleading if the reader fails to understand this.

Chapter 7

Daniel published his book with the narratives in the first half and the prophecies in the second half. Thus, for chapter 7 we drop back in time a bit to that first year when Belshazzar sat on the throne of Babylon, approximately 553 BC. Daniel recounts the experience as a dream vision. Daniel’s vision here is not as murky as many would make it out to be, provided we adopt the Hebraic perspective. The biggest mistake is assuming things are relentlessly chronological. The second mistake is demanding we find a one-to-one relationship between every detail of the vision and something we recognize in reality. Only in Western minds does it necessarily represent some discrete, physical reality. The issue here is not typical allegorical reduction, but to see things from the moral logic of God’s Justice, which is inherent in Scripture, particularly in visions.

We begin with the Four Winds, described as servants of God, the standard image of wind or breath representing spirit. These four spirits are stirring the Great Sea, symbolic of fallen humanity as a whole. Arising from the worldwide mass of humanity we see a series of beasts, which we are told represent kings. Even here, it is not meant literally – the kings are not people, but roles. Each represents a known historical empire, here viewed in light of moral qualities. The first is Babylon, under which Daniel serves at the time of the vision. The sequence shows this as a powerful and noble empire, with a very human intellect at the helm in the guise of Nebuchadnezzar. The next is Medo-Persia, seen as a bear with a paw raised to strike. With an insatiable appetite, they were marked by greed in devouring other nations. Not a simple greed for wealth, but for dominance; they could not be bought off with tribute. Third comes the Greek Empire, swift as a winged predator already too fast. The Macedonian conquest was swifter than any would have imagined possible. The four heads represented the four generals who inherited

the empire at Alexander's death. Each of these three beasts maintained something recognizable to humans.

The final empire is Rome. It was an indescribable beast of massive power. However, Rome itself is a symbol of all governments following her in terms of moral justice. From the biblical perspective, Rome started something evil, something that made it completely foreign to nature, particularly human nature. This monstrosity bore features that no government ever should have. Rome pioneered making government altogether impersonal. In the process, it was by far the most dehumanizing, the most brutal, utterly lacking in grandeur and nobility. This sort of government is smothering, overwhelming in poking into every detail of human life. It is total rule, down to the last detail of human existence. The seeds of this sort of government eventually yield the rule of impersonal committees, ordinary people without a sense of greatness, arrogantly replacing the natural order. Oddly, our modern Western pretense to a rule of law builds on this morally despicable foundation of democratic political theory, as if it were somehow morally superior. This simply shows how utterly depraved is the very foundation of Western moral reasoning.

Horns always represent power and authority within a given context. These horns do not represent any particular list of rulers, nor any known confederation or other inheritors of this awful legacy. Rather, the number ten here represents the complete range of human power throughout human history. The three uprooted are those last three empires already seen in the previous beasts. Their legacy is wiped away by the last, new horn. This represents a particular success Satan has in creating this whole new type of total government. It boasts of things far greater than even the self-proclaimed "divine" monarchs.

It is this that sets the stage for Last Things – that is, these Last Days in which we live today. When the final manifestation of this evil form of government comes to power, Heaven prepares the Final Judgment against sin by the Cross. Take a moment to consider how Christ's crucifixion was merely a political convenience, having nothing to do with fundamental moral justice. Eventually, this beastly last government will be destroyed in a moral sense. Other governments had their time, but the memory of their grandeur is not forgotten. Finally, in proper logical order comes the Son who will restore the full moral justice of which the first three governments were a partial image. The crucifixion by the hideous beast simply set Christ free to take up His inheritance. He will assume His rule from Heaven over His people. The Kingdom of Heaven is established, and all human authority is subject to Him, at least in the hearts of His people. In the guise of the Roman Empire, human government forfeited its claim on the loyalty of God's children. Christians now submit directly to Christ, who lives inside their very persons. He is the ultimate Ruler, and all the demands of human government are mere background noise.

Daniel found this whole thing utterly shocking and distressing. Daniel wasn't just being polite when he spoke highly of the Babylonian Imperial glory as symbolized by the golden head of the great statue (chapter 2). Brutal and ugly Babylon may have been for those she conquered, but there was in that reign something that was noble and stirring in holy hearts. It was a grand fulfillment of the Noahic Covenant of human civil government, embracing and honoring the most fundamental moral requirements. The vision in chapter 2 and chapter 7 are much the same, but the latter shows Daniel something of the nature of things from the moral justice

viewpoint, while the former was granted as an understanding to fallen, pagan men – in this case, Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, the Lord built on top of that a moral understanding for Daniel and those of his nation who would have moral wisdom.

It becomes painfully clear to Daniel that Israel would never be free again, but would find herself under each of these. The brief independence in the period of the Maccabees was of no real significance viewed from this angle. What independence Judea held then was not a blessing from God, but merely a setting for turmoil in which the temptation to seek Rome's support would be the final trap. Under Rome, Israel would cease being a distinct nation among men, forever. A purely spiritual kingdom would displace it. The joy of that latter revelation could not comfort Daniel from the sorrow of his nation's demise.

Chapter 8

Daniel has already seen the doom of Babylon in his previous vision, falling to the Medo-Persian forces. Two years after that earlier vision, Daniel receives in about 551 BC another vision for what follows that doom. The text here returns to the Hebrew writing, as there is nothing left to tell the Chaldeans, but much that God wishes to reveal to His people. On a spiritual level, it is important to show the linkage between the next two empires, and how they form a one-two punch that sets up Israel for her final end. The vision does not clearly depict that end, but shows how it comes about.

Daniel sees himself in the future Persian summer palace of Susa, in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains where the ancient Elamite Kingdom once stood. The River Ulai is actually an ancient canal. Beside that watercourse he saw the ancient symbol of the Medo-Persian Empire, the symbol they used for themselves: a ram with two uneven horns. The Medes had been around longer as an organized nation, but the Persians were stronger. No other nation could resist their conquest. That is, until they had provoked the Greeks, attempting by various means to conquer them.

The Macedonian people referred to themselves as the "goat people," and the name Aegean means "of the goat." Once united under Phillip, his son Alexander led the Macedonians to force unity across all of Greece, then advancing into the Persian Empire. Because of all the intrigue and dirty tricks played against him by the Persians, Alexander rejected all attempts at treaty or surrender. His troops maneuvered in phalanxes, slicing through the Persian formations with ease. With such incredible speed, only the exhaustion of his men kept him from conquering past the far eastern edge of Persia. Three years after his conquests began, he died in Babylon. In short order, his entire royal line died out, and was replaced by his four generals. Cassander returned to rule Greece and its neighbors, while Lysimachus held Asia Minor. Ptolemy became the Greek Pharaoh of Egypt, and Seleucus grabbed Syria and Babylon.

The latter two founded dynasties we now name after them: Ptolemaic and Seleucid. The Egyptian branch first held Judea with a fairly benign hand. Ptolemy himself funded the Alexandrian Library and the attached university. His dynasty carried on in Alexander's evangelistic promotion of Hellenist culture. The Seleucids and Ptolemies fought back and forth over possession of Palestine and eventually the Seleucids kept it. They were decidedly less kind

to the inhabitants, as they used military force to impose Hellenism. One in particular, Antiochus (175-164 BC), lost all patience with the Jewish insistence on keeping the Law of Moses. He placed a statue of Jupiter in the Temple in 167 BC, sacrificed a pig to it on the altar, and forced the residents of Jerusalem to join in a pork feast. Then he sent agents with troops across the land to force every Jewish community to follow suit. This provoked an uprising that we call the Maccabean Revolt, led by the family eventually known to us as the Hasmoneans.

This abomination of desolation in the Temple lasted about three years. We note most English translations miss the point, when the angels discuss there would be a period of 2300 “evening-mornings” – a reference to 2300 offerings (morning and evening), for a total of 1150 days, just over three years. At the end of that time, the Maccabean revolt had succeeded to the point of allowing the Temple to be cleansed and rededicated. However, it would be foolish to see the little horn as simply one man; it was a role. This one man’s assault on Jewish religious practices was a manifestation of the one who had power to throw down stars from the sky, a Hebrew expression for leading angelic beings astray. Unlike the Mesopotamian astrologers, who saw the stars as gods, Hebrew culture regarded them as symbols for angelic beings, including those fallen as demons. The man, Antiochus IV, was empowered by Satan himself. What he accomplishes is the climax of a far greater destruction.

With the Persians and their Zoroastrian religion came the material wealth connection to faith. For the Persians, seeking the favor of the gods inevitably meant profit for the kings. While this applied in the literal sense of material wealth, they still valued humans as the ultimate resource. We see the material wealth connection later in the New Testament where Jesus confronts the Jewish assumption that wealth is the primary mark of God’s favor. It was under the Persians when Jews first developed their powerful banking industry, causing Jesus to remark about serving the god Mammon – a name we understand to mean material wealth. Under the Greeks, Jews developed a powerful attachment to Western logical forms, losing touch with their mystical Hebrew roots. Greek rationalism twists the essential concept of holiness by calling it a logical ideal; man seeking that ideal displaces revelation. God is no longer the initial force in redemption, by offering His grace and mercy via His mystical revelation. Thus, in Jesus’ day the Jewish leadership was spiritually blind, utterly lacking the very mental framework for understanding the revelation of God. While the Hasmoneans did bring about a brief period of political independence, the nation was already spiritually dead. As Daniel says it, Satan had trampled truth into the ground.

The angels proceed to explain to Daniel some elements of the vision. Among the notes we see that the little horn is powerful, but not by his own might. It’s a veiled reference to spirit sources. The power behind Antiochus IV worked to finish off the Nation of Israel in the sense of their identity as the Holy People, an attack on Israel-the-mission more than Israel-the-people. In the place of their Hebrew mindset, Satan caused deception to prosper; it was a new understanding that blinded them. In the end, Satan will be broken when he comes against the Prince of Princes – Christ – and his end will not be a matter of human activity, but the work of God Almighty.

For Daniel, the most startling thing was the ending of the sacrificial offerings in the Temple. From his point of view, just as the Nation of Israel was nearing their return for the very purpose of regaining the Temple rituals, it was to be taken from them. Thus, the part of the vision where

the offerings are suspended is something that would grab the attention of any Jew who read this. Once Antiochus took his oppressive measures, it was plain for anyone to see just what he was. This no doubt fired the passion of the few who dared to oppose him. However, Daniel surely senses it will be too late. The atmosphere in which the sacrifices are stopped is unchanged even after the Temple is cleansed. It looks different, and observant Jews today celebrate the Feast of Lights in honor of it, but in God's eyes it meant nothing. It was just a ritual, a blind observance of things they no longer understood. This realization must have truly broken Daniel's heart, for it leaves him physically ill for several days.

Chapter 9

The context of this chapter, the whole focus, is Daniel confessing the sins of his nation, Israel. We note immediately that he dates this event during the first year of the ruler he calls "Darius," appointed to manage Medo-Persian affairs in the district of Babylon, the flat plain at the southern end of Mesopotamia. We generally place that around 538 BC. This was nearly 70 years after the first exile under Babylon, affecting the royal family of Judah, including Daniel himself. Daniel had been reading Jeremiah's prophecy (25:11-12), which mentioned the approximate span of 70 years for the Exile. Daniel's confession on behalf of his nation is poetry beyond compare. In it, he clearly emphasizes that God is just, and while Israel sins recklessly even yet, he asks God to keep His promise.

The answer brought by the angel Gabriel, now familiar to Daniel, was dispatched immediately upon Daniel beginning his prayer. The answer is cryptic to us, but not to Daniel. If all we read here are numbers, to which we feel compelled to match dates with some measure of precision, we understand nothing. In Hebrew prophecy, numbers are first and foremost symbolic. We read the Old Testament all too often forcing a literal meaning to numbers where it is plainly wrong to Hebrew eyes. God Himself makes it entirely too clear that He does not set dates for things, but moves when the time is right, or when things are ready. There's no question whether He knows the dates of future events; Hebrew literature never considers the question in the first place. All things come from God's hand "in the fullness of time." Whatever Gabriel means here, the numbers are primarily symbols within an answer to what Daniel is asking: that Jehovah keeps His promise. Daniel does not realize at first that the return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple won't accomplish what he hopes, but it does fit into God's plan, so it will happen. Twisting the obvious meaning of the prophetic statements to match some predetermined use of the numbers does violence to God's Word. We must first see Gabriel's message in the context of Daniel's prayer.

Israel had sinned. The Northern Tribes were exiled permanently, gone forever, lost to history, because of open rebellion against Jehovah, from which they steadfastly refused to repent. Judah didn't go so far, but certainly did evil enough. During the long reign of Manasseh, things had gotten so bad that people no longer remembered the Law of Moses. Indeed, until the priests had stumbled across an old copy hidden in the Temple, Josiah would never have known just how to lead the nation in repentance. As it was, he was warned it was too late, but that the hammer would fall only after his reign. His reign was cut short by a fool's errand because God was ready. In the last few days of Judah, Jeremiah had warned them not to resist the conquest by

Babylon, for it was the hand of God. The Exile lasted about 70 years, but more importantly it ended when God was ready. According to Daniel's prayer, it appears they hadn't really repented, so there was some other reason for responding. Surely, there were good people, and they would do good things, but the nation as a whole had failed to repent as God required. Still, He was keeping His promise, in that they would return to their earthly home because He was ready to do it.

The word translated "week" is actually "seven" as there was no specific Hebrew word for "week." A basic principle is "seven" refers to sacredness, a concept that sometimes includes a completion of things. Seven also would represent an element of wrath (Lev. 26:18, 21, 24, 28). Realizing they had failed to repent, God was going to up their punishment seven-fold – 70 years of Exile becomes 70x7 years of mere survival as a Nation. At the end of that time, they would finish their sins. Their time would pass, and the fading national ritual purity would be replaced by eternal righteousness without a nation. This would see the end of Israel receiving any further prophecies, and the Most Holy would be *anointed* – the root meaning of "Messiah." At the same time, we see whereas the Exile was a time of God's patience at work, so the 70x7 would be a further patience of God giving His people one last chance to repent.

That the number of years between this message and the life of Jesus was more than 500 is not important at all here. We can argue from now until the Second Coming what is meant by "the decree to restore and build Jerusalem" and miss the point entirely. The period of 7x7 is a reference to the Jubilee Year. Until Israel complied with the Mosaic rhythm of existence, with their Sabbaths, and Sabbatical years, and Jubilee Years, etc., all the building they could do would mean nothing. Indeed, because they only paid lip service to genuine obedience, it would barely serve as ritual purity. As it was, from the year Cyrus released the exiles (538 BC), until they began actually operating under the Law of Moses under Nehemiah's reforms (445 BC) took about another 70 years. That decree to rebuild Jerusalem was supposed to be a reference Daniel understood, so most likely points to the initial Return from Exile. Let us not forget that this message was to Daniel, the man asking in prayer to hear from God. An important point was that this rebuilding would not be easy, and we can refer again to Nehemiah's account to find a literal fulfillment of that. Whatever we make of the "sevens," we dare not lose sight of the prophetic message regarding the end of the Nation of Israel.

For it would be Israel who works to cut off their own Messiah. It would be wholly unjust, for the Messiah would be guilty of no sin. He would suffer willingly on behalf of others. Indeed, because of Israel cutting Him off, their rebuilt city would be destroyed one last time. That destruction would come at the hands of the prince of those who would come to rule during Messiah's time: Rome. In AD 70, Titus, then son of the Roman Emperor, destroyed the city of Jerusalem. The warfare was long, and many hundreds of thousands had died by the time the soldiers swarmed into the city. The Temple was destroyed completely, and Jews were forbidden to enter even the suburbs. Here, it is tied directly to Israel's rejection of their Messiah. Notice that no amount of tweaking the "sevens" will make sense here.

Until John the Baptist, the Law of Moses stood. Once John began his ministry, the Law was being fulfilled in the sense of its final chapter. No unfinished business remained except the Messiah Himself. Thus, John called the people to one final chance to renew the Old Covenant as

the path to the New Covenant. During the last “seven” the New Covenant would begin – “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” At the midpoint, the Messiah would offer Himself and complete the Old Covenant. At His death, it was gone. There could be no further sacrifice; that was done. The Temple was meaningless. However, for the duration of that “seven” the Jews would continue as the focus of the message of the New Covenant. The rest of that verse is quite hard to translate. What is clear is that God will judge sin. It would seem that what follows after the final Messianic sacrifice will remain a great many horrifying things, which would continue until God was through. Keep in mind that the Early Church was convinced, whatever this all meant, this chapter of Daniel was fulfilled by AD 70, and the business of the last “week” was completed. Given their proximity to living memories of the Apostles’ teaching, it takes incredible arrogance to somehow decide we have found something they missed.

The contention here is to warn the modern reader: If we must see the “weeks” as periods of time, then we must be prepared to see things through the very relaxed concept of time held by Hebrew culture. When dealing with the work of God, time is a very flexible, elastic concept. Trying to read the sevens as precise time periods is insanity, and serves only to obscure the actual prophecy. The whole issue was the utter failure of Israel to be faithful, to actually translate into their lives a simplified ritual and legal code, and to build a faith in the Redeemer who brought them out of slavery. They were offered freedom, but barely tolerated the mere earthly version of it. Eventually spiritual freedom would be offered to the whole of humanity. That would be the final end of the Law of Moses. Daniel’s prayer was for the restoration of Israel as she could have been. Gabriel related God’s message that it would not happen. What God had promised, both blessing and curse, would most certainly be fulfilled.

Chapter 10

It becomes necessary here to remind ourselves of the basic principle of Christian understanding of prophecy, particularly in the Old Testament: The primary reason for preserving the Old Testament in the first place is because it points to Christ (1 Peter 1:10-12). Further, we are compelled to read the Old Testament in the same fashion as the New Testament writers. They invariably took a Hebrew Mystical view, often dismissively called “spiritualizing” the text today. Finally, the clues to what particular reading we should have are not wide open to any subjective impulse, but are clearly laid out in Scripture and amplified by external sources taking the same view. Among the Hebrew writers of the Old Testament, Daniel raises to a high art form the mystical symbolic and parabolic forms, which the Apostle John does well to emulate in his Revelation, both in style and in content.

The reason John links his Revelation of Last Things to Daniel’s prophecy is because Daniel was given such a clear understanding of the gospel truth well before it came. It was first a stone cut without hands, which became a mountain filling the whole earth. Then it was a vision of the Ancient of Days establishing His Kingdom on the destruction of the Fourth Beast. Closely connected to this new Kingdom of Heaven would be the cultural demise of Daniel’s own nation, which Daniel was shown in the influence of the Persian and Greek religious cultures. Then Daniel is shown in the Seventy Weeks how the Restoration would be an empty gesture,

lacking any restoration of faith, ending in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple ritual. Now we approach the final vision, showing in some detail the events of how the last vestige of Israel as a people would become so wrapped up in politics and materialism that they would even go so far as to compromise with someone seeking to wipe away every trace of Mosaic Law. Daniel struggled not with discernment of the message, but in making sense of it, in light of his youth under the reforms of Josiah and reading his fellow prophets. That all this effort would come to naught, that the Restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple meant nothing in the long run, and that all his hopes had hung on the wrong objective was a bit hard to process.

Thus, we learn immediately that Daniel most surely understood the message in the vision. Daniel had been in mourning, seeking some consolation from the Lord, seeking to understand all he had learned so far. Three weeks into this deep mourning, as he stood by the Tigris River, he encountered an eternal presence. He has a vision of the final revelation of Jehovah, a manifestation of the Messiah, floating above the river. We need not understand all the ways in which this caused so much distress to Daniel. Anyone in the presence of God is immediately stricken with a powerful realization of their sinful nature, and it affected Daniel's entourage the same way. Daniel's exceptional spiritual sensitivity amplified the effect. Daniel cannot proceed with the matter at hand until the angels intervene to strengthen him. We assume reasonably this is Gabriel again, bringing the manifestation of Messiah with him.

The text continues directly into the next chapter.

Chapter 11

Daniel is conferring with Gabriel near the Tigris River regarding a vision of the Messiah.

We learn in passing that Daniel heard a lot of things, from the Messiah and from Gabriel, which he does not appear to record for us. We also get a partial image of the way things work in the Spirit Realm, between demons and angels. We discover that all the gods of the nations are actually demons, and they have a valid authority that can affect the way God answers prayer, at least to delay things as we count time here in our world. We learn that Michael is the name for the angel of Israel. So just what is this matter Gabriel brings to Daniel that calls for such an intense battle in the Spirit Realm? The demons that rule the kingdoms don't want Daniel to know what comes next. They don't want him to write his prophecies regarding the final end of Israel as a nation on earth. Yet, we see Michael finds it part of his mission to make sure Daniel hears this description of how Israel commits the final betrayal of her Covenant with God.

It would be so very easy to get wrapped up in the historical details of Gabriel's narrative, but that misses the point. Indeed, from a historian's point of view, we must note that some really important stuff gets passed over quickly. Several major Persian Emperors get a passing mention, and Alexander the Great gets one sentence. We are then treated to a quick review of some truly minor squabbling between the Seleucids and Ptolemies over Judea. While the details are accurate, it's odd that the things included and the things unmentioned. Rather, we notice the tone seems to place a great deal of emphasis on how the battles are endless, mixed with petty political wrangling, all devastating to the Jews trapped in the middle. Marriages, alliances, betrayals, territory, troops, gold – and none of it really accomplishes anything. Finally, we are

introduced to a fellow we now know is named Antiochus IV, and he gets half of chapter 11, yet historically is quite insignificant. Further, we see no mention at all of the Maccabees or their Hasmonean Dynasty, nor the beginning of Roman domination in 63 BC. The lesson is drilled home in the words of Gabriel, God's own Messenger Angel: The spiritual understanding of human events little notes what men see, but makes much of the spiritual forces behind them.

What exactly is the spiritual importance of this petty monarch named Antiochus, his crumbling kingdom, and his mad persecution of the Jews? He is a symbol of Satan. As Jesus manifests the Father, so Antiochus manifests Satan. This is the demonic man who brings to reality the thing Daniel most dreads: the destruction of Israel, Jerusalem, the Temple and its services, and the Law of Moses itself. And he does it all with an alliance of Jews. The few who cling to the truth (11:32-35) will make their presence felt, but they can't stop the relentless fall of the nation. The rest of the chapter cannot be easily matched to known historical events, simply because it recounts the spiritual events behind the whole narrative. This spirit is described in previous visions as the blasphemous horn of the Fourth Beast and as behind one of the four horns of the Goat. His purpose is to destroy the Nation of Israel, to shatter the Law of Moses. This will end in one final battle of spiritual forces, symbolized by the gathering of troops outside Jerusalem, a battle Satan will lose. The actual historical event will be the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. However, that will not give Satan any victory, but is the beginning of the end for him.

The Apostle John makes of this Final Battle something to celebrate, and elaborates the spiritual symbols at length in the Apocalypse. John connects this vision to a wider context of explaining that this is how Satan operates. As there will be a New Israel, so Satan will try again to destroy the New Jerusalem of Christ. For Daniel, just trying to assemble a mental framework for the complete tectonic shift from all he has known to a world where such massive spiritual warfare results in countless thousands of lives lost, it's all too much. Yes, he understood it. He knew much of it stretched before him by many years. Had the Returnees bothered to retain their Hebrew cultural orientation, they would have understood it, too. But Daniel had already been warned they would lose it to Persian and Greek influences, becoming steadily wrapped up in human politics and materialism, as if such things could somehow reflect what really mattered. The darkest part of the vision for Daniel was the realization that his own people would reject their Messiah.

Chapter 12

Daniel already knows his people will finally turn against the truth of God. He knows that they will completely lose the ability to understand the Word by their exposure to the Persian and Greek cultures. He knows that the Covenant of Moses will come to a close, replaced with some other covenant under the Messiah. That new covenant will include people from the whole world, and Israelites must enter in the same as everyone else. Their unique standing before God will end. He has been warned there is a great evil spirit working through his people, and that this spirit will next manifest itself via a future King of the North. This king will attempt to destroy the Law of Moses, and will have allies within Israel helping him. He will oppose the Messiah, too. He understands that Israel will reject the Messiah, aligning themselves with this evil ruling spirit, and that a final battle will destroy Jerusalem, but Satan's man will not win.

During this last end of Israel and Jerusalem, Michael will arise to take special care over the nation. This final testing will be like nothing Israel has experienced before. Only those who embrace the Messiah and whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be alive at the end. When the Final Judgment comes, and the dead are called up to face God, some will meet His approval, and some will not. It will not be on the basis of dying in Moses, but in the Messiah – simply being Israeli will mean nothing. Those who make the transition to the Eternal Kingdom will shine like stars, a witness to the truth revealed in the Messiah.

Daniel was obliged to keep the vision sealed, wrapped up in symbolic and parabolic language. While human knowledge will grow exponentially, and travel across the face of the earth will become easy, it won't help them understand the parabolic language of the Kingdom. Daniel saw in the climax of the vision two attendants with the Messianic figure floating above the Tigris. He swore on the Life of God Himself that there would most certainly be a deep and sorrowful time of tribulation when Israel was finally destroyed, tribulation symbolized numerically as three-and-a-half. This final declaration Daniel didn't quite understand as it was worded. He wanted to know what came after that, but it was not for him to know. These words would make sense only to those who came after Christ had inaugurated the Kingdom of Heaven. In due time, those of Israel who were wise would see and understand, but the majority would not, because their hearts would be darkened by sin.

The final verses are cryptic to us because we don't operate under the Hebrew calendar system. Again, it's not a matter of counting off days between two events, but recognizing the numerical reference in the context of Hebrew life and culture. Without burying the reader in details of how this works out, it's enough to note that the reference is to a time of tribulation (3.5 years) as it would be counted in Sabbath Years and Jubilee Years, because extra days and months are added to account for the drift in the Hebrew year of 360 days. Jeremiah had prophesied about catching up on the missed Sabbaths (2 Chronicles 36:21). Since we know Daniel was told Israel had not repented, and had earned an additional punishment of 70x7 (chapter 9), this refers to the hope that God's wrath will finally be turned away once the Temple is destroyed. To live beyond the destruction of the Temple is to enter a truly blessed Jubilee.

The last verse is one of the earliest clear references to the notion that physical death is just a waiting state, a time of rest, after which is the eternal reward. It's the same as telling Daniel his name was written in the Lamb's Book of Life.