



THE DREAM AND ITS MEANING – DANIEL 2:31-45	13
THE MACCABEAN THEORY	13
THE TRADITIONAL THEORY	13
THE DISPENSATIONAL THEORY	14
DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS ELEVATED – DANIEL 2:46-49	14
PERSONAL APPLICATION – DANIEL 3	15

“After being granted a brief reprieve, Daniel called his three Hebrew friends to prayer, and that night in a vision, God gave Daniel both the dream and the meaning”

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DREAM – DANIEL 2:1-30

The second test of Daniel's fitness and superior abilities occurred perhaps within a year of starting his educational program. Nebuchadnezzar had experienced a disturbing dream which he couldn't understand.* In order to ascertain its meaning and to test his magicians' genuine ability to interpret his dream, he demanded not only an interpretation, but a recounting of the dream without any hints as to its substance. He threatened execution if they could not recover the dream and its meaning (2:1-9). Without Nebuchadnezzar's description any attempt was humanly impossible, so they failed (2:10-11). As threatened, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the executions, which included the execution of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah (2:12-13). When Daniel was summoned for execution, he requested an audience with Nebuchadnezzar (2:14-16). After being granted a brief reprieve, Daniel called his three Hebrew friends to prayer, and that night in a vision, God gave Daniel both the dream and the meaning (2:17-23). The execution order was stayed, and Daniel was brought before Nebuchadnezzar to recount both the substance and the interpretation of the dream (2:24-30). Critical to the interpretation was that the dream foretold “what will happen in days to come” (2:28-29). The expression “days to come” or “the last days” had, by the time of Daniel, become a common expression of the prophets, since it was used by Isaiah (2:2), Micah (4:1), Hosea (3:5), Jeremiah (23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39) and Ezekiel (38:8, 16). The phrase could refer to events as close as the return of the Jews from exile or, further into the future, it could refer to universal peace to be established by the Messiah.

** In 2:5 older versions of the Bible translate “The thing is gone from me,” meaning Nebuchadnezzar forgot the dream. While more modern versions translate: “My mind is firm on this” or “my command has gone out,” meaning he knows his dream, but expects them to guess it or suffer the consequences. The Hebrew and Greek Septuagint are not unequivocal.*

THE DREAM AND ITS MEANING – DANIEL 2:31-45

The central object of the dream was a huge statue constructed out of precious, semi-precious, base metals and clay. The head was gold, the chest and arms silver, the belly and loins bronze, the legs of iron, and the feet a mixture of iron and clay (2:31-33). The obvious character of the statue is that the value of the metals decrease as one moves downward while the strengths of the metal increase (except for the feet). The clay feet were shattered by a huge rock cut out by a power greater than human strength with the result that the entire statue crumbled. The wind swept away all the pieces, but the rock became a great mountain filling the whole world (2:34-35).

Daniel interpreted the dream as representing future kingdoms beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon and extending to the time God would set up a kingdom that would endure forever (2:36-45). The easiest two interpretations are Daniel's direct assertion to Nebuchadnezzar, "You are that head of gold," and his description of the eternal kingdom set up by God. However, the identities of the intermediate kingdoms have been much debated. The interpretations hinge on whether it is based on a conservative traditional view or a critical one. Liberal scholars debate whether or not Daniel is a genuine prophet. Those who deny a context in the sixth century B.C. are often skeptical of prophecy. In their view, the "prophecy" is offered after the fact, and such interpreters look backward from the Maccabean Period to find historical parallels of which the unknown author is already aware. Those of us who accept a context in the sixth century B.C., and more particularly, who accept Jesus' assessment that Daniel was a prophet (Matthew 24:15), have no restrictions on what God plans for the future, or how far it extends, perhaps to the second coming of Christ.

Crucial to the debate is defining the various political entities that arose in the ancient Near East after the time of Daniel. After Babylon there is the Medo-Persian Empire, (though some try to separate Media from Persia). After the Medo-Persian period is Alexander's Empire, then the division of his empire among his generals. The two most prominent parts of Alexander's divided empire, at least as far as Palestine was concerned, were Egypt and Syria, and both attempted to control the land bridge that lay between them. Then comes Rome, and during the time of Rome,

Jesus Christ and the beginnings of the Christian church.

So the critical factor is the question of how many kingdoms Daniel intended to describe. He identifies four kingdoms, naming Babylon as the first, making only a cursory reference to the second, and labeling the others only "third" and "fourth." However, this raises the question, are the mixed materials of the feet and toes intended to represent yet a fifth kingdom prior to the establishment of a kingdom by God, or do the iron and clay simply indicate that the later period of the fourth kingdom will be fragmentary and weak?

In summary, there are at least *three interpretive schemes* for Nebuchadnezzar's dream which interpret the above factors differently. They all have a common starting point, taken from the specific identification of Nebuchadnezzar as the head of gold (2:38b). Then, they all attempt to identify the last kingdom prior to the one set up by God. This, in turn, determines the interpretation of the intermediate kingdoms. For those accepting predictive prophecy, the kingdom set up by God refers to the messianic kingdom inaugurated by Christ. For those rejecting predictive prophecy, the kingdom set up by God is the independent Jewish state established by the Maccabees. Here, then, are the three theories:

THE MACCABEAN THEORY

(Generally accepted by critical scholars) holds that there are four successive empires, Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece. The fourth one extends into the branch of the Greek Empire headed up under Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the Seleucid dynasty in Syria. The stone kingdom that God establishes is the independence won by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers. A primary weakness of this view is the splitting of Media and Persia into two empires, which does not conform to historical and archaeological data.

"...the power of God's kingdom is not merely reserved for the future, for it is already present and active in the world."

THE TRADITIONAL THEORY

(Generally accepted by scholars who accept predictive prophecy and by the historical church at least back to

the time of Jerome in the 4th century) is that the four successive empires are Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. The stone cut from the mountain is the kingdom of God and/or the church inaugurated by Jesus in his public ministry. Here, the feet and toes represent the later stages of the Roman Empire when it began to fragment. During the time of Rome, the kingdom of God was inaugurated by Jesus, and ultimately, it will destroy all worldly powers when Christ returns the second time. However, the power of God’s kingdom is not merely reserved for the future, for it is already present and active in the world.

THE DISPENSATIONAL THEORY

(Accepted by the dispensational school of eschatology) agrees with the traditional theory that the four successive empires are Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. However, dispensationalists argue that the feet and toes are yet a fifth empire, the kingdom of the antichrist, which would arise at the end of the ages. It will be a “revived Rome” composed of a coalition of nations represented by the ten toes. Some dispensationalists argue that this fifth empire is the European Union of the late 20th century. The stone kingdom established by God is the millennial reign of Christ to be established after his second coming. Here is a representative chart of these three interpretations.

	MACCABEAN	TRADITIONAL	DISPENSATION
Head of Gold	Babylon	Babylon	Babylon
Chest of Silver	Media	Medo-Persia	Medo-Persia
Belly of Bronze	Persia	Greece	Greece
Legs of Iron	Greece	Rome	Rome
Feet & Toes	–	–	Antichrist
Stone Kingdom	Maccabees	Church	Millennium

The traditional view seems to have the fewest problems historically and theologically. Everyone agrees that Babylon is the first kingdom. The historical successor to Babylon was Cyrus and the Persians, while Alexander the Great and the Greeks followed them with a kingdom that ruled “over the whole earth” (2:39). The iron empire well suits the character of Rome, and the fragmentation of the feet and toes well suits the latter stages of Rome before its fall. The eternal kingdom established supernaturally that will never be destroyed and that ultimately will crush all worldly kingdoms is an apt description of the kingdom

of God as preached by Jesus and the apostles. This conclusion is the more plausible, since the stone kingdom arises “in the days of those kings” (2:44a), that is, the time of the rulers of the Roman Empire.

The Maccabean theory, on the other hand, depends upon splitting Media and Persia into two empires, a conclusion that (according to Roland Harrison, and others) seems historically unjustified. Maccabean proponents frequently embrace an assessment of Scripture which is incompatible with inspiration and infallibility.

The dispensational theory is less believable, since it depends too much on the system it has constructed, and not enough on exegesis of the biblical texts. For example, some dispensationalists have related Daniel 2 to the events of late 20th century politics, a conclusion that seems forced and unsupported.

DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS ELEVATED – DANIEL 2:46-49

When Nebuchadnezzar had heard Daniel’s explanation, he was rightfully overwhelmed. This was certainly the dream he had dreamed, and the fact that Daniel had recounted the dream by God’s revelation confirmed his interpretation (2:46-47). As a result, Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel as the provincial ruler of the capital and administrator over all the other court advisors (2:48). He even granted Daniel’s request to elevate his friends as provincial administrators (2:49).

This account not only gives Daniel credence as a prophet of God, but illustrates again the theme of the book summarized in 4:17 and 5:21: “...the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men...”

(Special acknowledgement: The chart and analysis by Rev. Dan Lewis, Darbarlines Commentary)

PERSONAL APPLICATION – DANIEL 3

Heavenly Father, we are challenged to remain faithful in a world of cultural idols. Keep us safe from the allure of false prophets and deceitful messages, through the power of Jesus' holy name. Amen.

1. Nebuchadnezzar had a golden statue constructed. What did he command? (3:1-7)

2. Nebuchadnezzar's statue was not the first idol to whom the Jews were encouraged to pay homage.

Name some other idols before whom they had bowed the knee.

Exodus 32:1-6

Judges 2:11-14

Judges 8:22-27

1 Kings 11:1-8

3. What again is God's first and foremost prohibition regarding Himself and images? (Ex. 20:1-6)

4. Israel's apostasy often led to God's wrath and punishment.

Name two consequences mentioned in Numbers 16:28-35

Name another in Numbers 21:4-8

What is worse than physical death? (Matthew 10:28)

5. What comfort does a Christian enjoy according to these passages?

Romans 6:23

Daniel 12:2

Psalm 23:6

John 11:25

6. Daniel's three friends refused to worship the idol. Who tattled on them (vv. 8-12)

Why? (1:19-21, 2:48-49)

7. For most of us, most of the time, life is fairly pleasant and uneventful. What assurances does God give to us when life is not so sweet?

Hebrews 11:35-40

Matthew 5:10-12

8. How did Jesus respond when persecuted?

1 Peter 2:21-23

Isaiah 53:7

Luke 23:34

9. What advice does Scripture provide when we are persecuted?

1 Peter 1:6-9

1 Peter 3:9-12

Romans 12:14-21

Matthew 5:43-45

10. Can a faithful Christian avoid persecution?

a. 2 Timothy 3:10-12

John 15:18-21

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11. In our country and culture, we are seldom asked to bow before an idol or statue of gold. However, what other “gods” are we tempted to serve?

Matthew 4:8-11

Matthew 16:26

Luke 18:9-12

John 12:42-43

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12. Of what were the three Hebrews certain? (v. 17)

Even if God should choose not to save them physically, what did they boldly declare? (v. 18)

How could they maintain loyalty to God should God not save them; that is, what were they expecting? (Hebrews 11:13-16)

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13. Why is worshipping an idol futile? (Isaiah 46:5-7, Psalms 115:2-8)

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14. Describe an occasion when you were tempted to choose between Christ and the way of the world.

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15. Some Christians feel uncomfortable in certain churches where carved images populate the sanctuary. Do such images have a place in worship?

How can they contribute to worship?

In what way might they distract?

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16. The King, in his rage, ordered the furnace to be heated how much hotter? (v. 19)
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What happened to the officers and the three men when they were led to the furnace? (vv 22-23)

17. Besides the three Hebrews, who else was visible walking in the furnace? (v. 25)

Is there a distinction between v. 25 and v. 28?

Who appeared to Abraham? (Genesis 18:20-22)

To whom does the book of Hebrews compare him? (Hebrews 7:1-3)

What did Jesus say about Abraham? (John 8:56-58)

18. What did Nebuchadnezzar say about God after the young men were saved unscathed? (v. 28)

What did he order? (v. 29)

Do you think he believed in God or believed in a god? (v. 29b, 4:1-3)

What did Peter say about Jesus? (Acts 4:12)

What does Paul say we should do? (Philippians 2:10)

19. Bowing the knee before Jesus may be easier at home or in church, but what challenges do we face in standing up for Jesus in public?
