

Would you please explain Nebuchadnezzar's dream, as recorded in Daniel 4?

Much prophetic speculation has ensued pertaining to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 4, but if we allow the Bible to interpret itself, the answer to the meaning of that dream becomes very clear.

Note, first, the following highlights from that chapter. We are told that Nebuchadnezzar had a dream which made him afraid (verse 5), but none of the "wise men of Babylon" could explain the meaning of the dream. Finally, Daniel was brought before the king (verse 8). We will recall that Daniel had explained to the king his first dream about a statue, as recorded in Daniel 2.

Nebuchadnezzar described to Daniel his second dream and asked him to interpret the same for him. In the dream, Nebuchadnezzar had seen a strong tree, which was cut down, but the stump and roots in the earth would be preserved, "bound with a band of iron and bronze" (verse 15). Showing that the dream did not refer to an ordinary tree, the king continued to describe to Daniel that a watcher from heaven said: "The heart be changed from that of a man, Let him be given the heart of a beast, And let seven times pass over him" (verse 16).

Daniel proceeded to explain the meaning of the dream, as follows:

"(20) The tree that you saw, which grew and became strong... (22) It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong... (23) And inasmuch as the king saw a watcher, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Chop down the tree and destroy it, but leave its stump and roots in the earth, bound with a band of iron and bronze in the tender grass of the field; let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let him graze with the beasts of the

field, till seven times pass over him'; (24) THIS IS THE INTERPRETATION, O KING, and this is the decree of the Most High... (25) They shall drive you from men, your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field, and they shall make you eat grass like oxen. They shall wet you with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass OVER YOU, till you know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever He chooses. (26) And inasmuch as they gave the command to leave the stump and roots of the tree, YOUR KINGDOM shall be assured TO YOU, AFTER YOU COME TO KNOW THAT HEAVEN RULES..."

After about twelve months, the fulfillment of the dream began to come to pass. Nebuchadnezzar, in his pride, glorified himself rather than God, and immediately, he was driven out from men to live with the beasts "for seven times," until, "at the end of the time," his understanding and his reason returned to him (verses 32, 34, 36). Nebuchadnezzar is reported as saying: "...I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down" (Daniel 4:36-37).

Please note that this dream is strictly talking about events in Nebuchadnezzar's life. The dream referred specifically and exclusively to him--and not to anyone coming after him. Compare again Daniel 4:22, 25, 26, 32-33, 34.

This is remarkable because Nebuchadnezzar's first dream in Daniel 2 clearly is said to refer to future times and kingdoms, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar, and ending with the return of Christ. Nothing similar is remotely suggested to apply to Nebuchadnezzar's second dream in Daniel 4.

Let's notice what is said specifically in and about that dream:

(1) The Cut-Down Tree

Verse 14 tells us that the tree was to be cut down

and that the beasts were commanded to flee away from under its branches. This means that the king's courtiers, officers, etc., all abandoned him as soon as his insanity appeared; and he soon fled from the society of men (compare Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible).

(2) The Stump and the Roots Remain

Verse 15 tells us that the stump and the roots should be left. Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible explains:

"The word here used [for "stump"] implies that it was still alive, or that there was a germ which would send up a new shoot, so that the tree would live again. The idea is, that though the mighty tree would fall, yet there would remain vitality in the root, or the portion that would remain in the earth after the tree was cut down, and that this would spring up again - a most striking image of what would occur to Nebuchadnezzar after he should be cast down from his lofty throne, and be again restored to his reason and to power."

(3) Stump Bound With Band of Iron and Brass

We are also told, in verse 15, that the stump would be bound with "a band of iron and brass."

Barnes explains:

"This expression may be regarded as applicable either to the cut-down tree, or to the humbled monarch. If applied to the former, it would seem that the idea is, that the stump or root of a tree, deemed so valuable, would be carefully secured by an enclosure of iron or brass, either in the form of a hoop placed round the top of the stump, to preserve it from being opened or cracked by the heat of the sun, so as to admit moisture, which would rot it; or around the roots, to bind it together, with the hope that it would grow again; or it may refer to a railing or enclosure of iron or brass, to keep it from being plowed or dug up as worthless. In either case, it would be guarded with the hope that a tree so valuable might spring up again.

"If applied to the monarch - an explanation not

inconsistent with the proper interpretation of the passage - it would seem to refer to some method of securing the royal maniac in bonds of iron and brass, as with the hope that his reason might still be restored, or with a view to keep him from inflicting fatal injury on himself. That the thing here referred to might be practiced in regard to a valuable tree cut down, or broken down, is by no means improbable; that it might be practiced in reference to the monarch is in accordance with the manner in which the insane have been treated in all ages and countries."

John Gill's Exposition to the Entire Bible adds:

"... the allusion is to his distracted condition afterwards related; it being usual to bind madmen with chains of iron or brass, to keep them from hurting themselves and others, as in [Mark 5:4]."

(4) Heart Changed for Seven Times

Verse 16 explains that the king's heart would be changed for seven times.

Barnes states regarding the king's changed heart:

"... some man was represented by the vision... The word heart here seems to refer to nature - 'let his nature or propensity cease to be that of a man, and become like that of a beast; let him cease to act as a man, and act as the beasts do...'"

Regarding "seven times," Barnes points out:

"The more common interpretation is what supposes that it was a year, and this will agree better with all the circumstances of the case than any other period... Josephus understands by it 'seven years'... While the Chaldee word is indeterminate in respect to the length of time, the most natural and obvious construction here and elsewhere, in the use of the word, is to refer it to years. Days or weeks would be obviously too short, and though in this place the word 'months' would perhaps embrace all that would be necessary, yet in the other places where the word occurs in Daniel it undoubtedly refers to years, and there is, therefore, a propriety in

understanding it in the same manner here."

The Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge agrees, stating: "seven times: That is, seven years, a time in the prophetic language denoting a year."

The commentary of Jamieson, Fausset and Brown agrees ("times - that is, 'years.'"); and so do Gill ("seven years are meant"); and Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible, where we read:

"Let him continue in this state for seven years. I knew a man who was thus changed in his heart - in his imagination. He believed himself to be a bear, and would imitate the usual growl, etc.; and the case did not appear to be hypochondriacal. Whether he ever came to sound mind, I know not."

(5) The King's Restoration

After seven years of insanity, King Nebuchadnezzar became sane again and was restored to his kingdom, as was also clearly announced in the dream (verse 26).

Clarke writes:

"No new king was set up; Evil-merodach his son was regent during his father's insanity."

Gill adds:

"... another king should not be set up in his place; and though the kingdom and administration of it would depart from him for a while, yet it would be restored again, and be firm and stable..."

Verse 34 tells us that "at the end of the days," Nebuchadnezzar was restored to sanity. As Barnes explains, "That is, the time designated; to wit, the 'seven times' that were to pass over him." Gill adds that that phrase means: "Of the time fixed in the dream; that is, at the end of seven years."

(6) The Lion and the Man

Another reference to that incident is found in Daniel 7 where Daniel sees four beasts in a dream, representing four world-ruling kingdoms which

would come up from the sea and arise out of the earth (verses 3, 17). The first beast was the Babylonian Empire under King Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 4 tells us that it "was like a lion, and had eagle's wings... till its wings were plucked off; and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it." The reference to Nebuchadnezzar is unmistakable, who was living with the beasts for seven years--with the heart of an animal--and who was then restored by receiving again the heart of a man.

The commentary of Jamieson, Fausset and Brown explains this passage as follows:

"Nebuchadnezzar is called 'the lion' [Jeremiah 4:7]... So long as Nebuchadnezzar, in haughty pride, relied on his own strength, he forfeited the true dignity of man, and was therefore degraded to be with the beasts. [Daniel 4:16]: 'Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him.' But after he learned by this sore discipline that 'the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men' [Daniel 4:35, 36], the change took place in him, 'a man's heart is given to him'; instead of his former beast's heart, he attains man's true position, namely, to be consciously dependent on God."

(7) Conclusion

It is abundantly clear from the biblical description of the dream and its interpretation, that the dream referred strictly and exclusively to the time of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity and subsequent discovery.

We are aware that some have alleged over the years that Daniel 4 would also refer to the curse or punishment of the Babylonian Empire for seven "prophetic" times or 2,520 years, beginning with the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. They have also claimed that somehow, ancient Babylon would be restored to power after the time of its punishment, and that Christ's reference in Luke 21:24 to the fulfillment of the times of the Gentiles (see previous Q&A), would be somehow related to that punishment and/or restoration of Babylon.

However, there is no biblical support for any of these concepts. A follow-up Q&A will discuss in more detail why all of these speculations are faulty.

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