

A DREAM OF A DREAM IN DANIEL 2

ARON PINKER

Chapter 2 of the Book of Daniel is devoted in its entirety to Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its unusual recapturing and interpretation by Daniel. The basic essentials of the story presented are as follows:

1. King Nebuchadnezzar has a very disturbing dream.
2. The King asks the court diviners¹ to describe the dream and provide an interpretation of it, on threat of death if they fail.
3. The court diviners are unable to meet Nebuchadnezzar's demand.
4. Daniel and his friends, along with the Chaldean court diviners, face death.
5. Daniel asks for a postponement of the execution in an effort to find a solution to the crisis.
6. Daniel and his friends implore God for help in their predicament.
7. God reveals to Daniel in a nighttime vision the mystery of the dream and its interpretation.
8. Daniel presents the dream and its interpretation to Nebuchadnezzar.
9. Nebuchadnezzar pays homage to Daniel and acknowledges the superiority of God.
10. Daniel and his friend are given high positions in the kingdom.

What is the purpose of this dramatic story, in which Daniel acts as a reincarnation of Joseph but in even more demanding circumstances? What is the message that those who included this story in a book of the canon hoped a reader will deduce?² Assuming that the story is factual and, despite some historical inaccuracies, occurred at the beginning of the Babylonian Exile, was it intended to serve as a model for Jewish behavior in the Diaspora? Was Daniel's behavior supposed to serve as a paradigm for the Jew in exile? The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on these issues.

Aron Pinker has a M.Sc. in theoretical physics and mathematics from The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and a Ph.D. in mathematics from Columbia University, N.Y. He was a professor of mathematics at Frostburg State University, and a Principal Operation Research Scientist at ANSER. He is author of numerous articles and several books which have been published in Israel, among them The Atom and Theory of Relativity. Whatever free time he has is dedicated to Judaic studies. Dr. Pinker resides in Silver Spring, MD

In Chapter 1, we learned that Daniel and his friends were of royal or noble lineage, and that they had mental ability, religious piety, and spiritual strength. Their excellence is simply summarized: *Whenever the king put a question to them requiring wisdom and understanding, he found them to be ten times better than all the magicians and exorcists throughout his realm* (Dan. 1:20).

Is it the intent in Chapter 2 to establish Daniel's *bona fides* as a prophet? Was Daniel a prophet? Can the revelation to Daniel of the dream and its interpretation be considered a prophetic experience (dream/vision)? The critical verses are 2:18-19. Upon obtaining a delay in giving the King a response to his request, Daniel returns to his house and informs his friends of the matter *so that they might implore the God of Heaven for help regarding this mystery* (2:18). Daniel's suggestion to his friends could be considered as a prophet's mental ideational focusing and spiritual preparation for prophecy. Abarbanel says:

Prophets prepared their souls for prophecy by withdrawing from material things that hamper spiritual communion. They let their thoughts dwell on the subjects that they wanted to know and then prophecy occurred to them on that subject in detail, because of fixation of their mind on them.³

Subsequently, the mystery is revealed to Daniel; then he blesses the God of Heaven (2:19). The revelation clearly occurs at night in a vision, as prophetic revelations usually do, and Daniel's blessing God implies that it was God who made the revelation, *'For now You have let me know what we asked of You; You have let us know what concerns the king'* (2:23). This inference is bolstered by the fact that the revelation had to be very specific about the dream itself, which was known to the King but was entirely unknown to Daniel. Nonetheless, Daniel's place in the roster of Israelite prophets is by no means secure.

In the Talmud, Daniel is spoken of as weightier than "all the **wise men** of the peoples" (TB Yoma 77a) but not as a prophet. Indeed, R' Jeremiah (some say R' Hiya Bar Abba) says, "Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi are superior to him [Daniel] and he is superior to them. They are superior to him because they are prophets and he is not. He is superior to them because he saw [a vision] and they did not see" (TB Megilah 25a). Rashi explains that Daniel was not a prophet because he was not sent to the people of Israel with any prophecy. Talmudic and rabbinic

literature usually refers to Daniel as a saint and an example, but the allusions are of personal, not theological interest.⁴

Medieval Jewish opinion appears to have been even less favorable to Daniel. Kimchi, in his Preface to the Book of Psalms, distinguishes between prophecy and the holy spirit [*ruach hakodesh*] valuing the former as far higher because it dispossessed the recipient of his natural faculties, while the latter is but an illumination.⁵ Kimchi stresses

. . . though Daniel saw visions (*mar'ot*) and phenomena (*hezyonot*) in dreams and while awake his strength and knowledge in those visions did not reach that of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the other Prophets; therefore, his book was not included among the books of the prophets, but was included among the books called 'Ketubim,' to indicated that they were written with *ruach hakodesh*.⁶

Maimonides' distinction between prophecy and illumination is more specific and reliant on the Hebrew Bible text. He says, "When prophets are inspired in a dream, they by no means call this a dream, although the prophecy reached them in a dream, but declare it decidedly to be a prophecy."⁷ He goes to great length in justifying his denying prophetic status to Daniel:

Daniel declares that he had a dream; although he sees an angel and hears his word, he speaks of the event as of a dream; even when he had received the information [concerning the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar], he speaks of it in the following manner - *Then was the secret revealed to Daniel in a night vision* (Dan. 2:19). On other occasions it is said, *He wrote down the dream; I saw in the visions by night; And the visions of my head confused me* (Dan. 7:1, 2, 15); *I was surprised at the vision, and none noticed it* (ibid. 8:27). There is no doubt that this is one degree below that form of prophecy to which the words, "In a dream I will speak to him," are applied. For this reason the nation desired to place the book of Daniel among the Hagiographa, and not among the Prophets. I have, therefore, pointed out to you, that the prophecy revealed to Daniel and Solomon, although they saw an angel in the dream, was not considered by them as a perfect prophecy, but as a dream containing correct information. They belonged to the class of men that spoke, inspired by the 'the holy spirit.'⁸

Abarbanel, however, stands out as an exception in considering Daniel a prophet. Ginzberg says: "In opposition to the Talmud and all later rabbinic tradition he [Abarbanel] counts Daniel among the prophets He is impelled to this by the fact that Daniel furnishes the foundation for his Messianic theory."⁹ It seems that Ibn Ezra thinks likewise, when he describes the Book of Daniel with the rhymes: *מה ספר איש חמודות, מדובר בו נכבדות, ונבואות עוברות ועתידות* [*zeh sepher ish hamudot, medubar bo nechbadot, nevuot o'vrot ve-a'tidot* – Pages of a precious man, weighty matters are in them, what will be and passed then]." In modern times, Driver insists on Daniel being a prophet of the exiles in Babylon.¹⁰ Ehrlich considers Daniel 2:1ff. a prophecy through the medium of the dream.¹¹ Similarly, Heschel, though denying Zechariah's night visions the status of prophetic dreams, does consider Daniel's vision in 2:19 to be such.¹²

If Daniel is granted the status of a prophet then the story in Daniel is straightforward. It highlights Daniel's prophetic distinction and God's greatness. Yet, we have seen that there is a strong stream in Jewish thought that denies Daniel the status of a prophet, while recognizing his intellectual and spiritual greatness. If he was not a prophet, then it is necessary to assess what Daniel could have possibly known, what information he could have obtained, and where he could have made his inspired inferences, all in the ambience of suspicion and competition in an oriental court.

First of all, Nebuchadnezzar's demand on the Chaldeans is outrageous. His accusation of "collusion" and "fraudulence" is preposterous, and the edict condemning them to eventual execution is unjust: *'If you will not make the dream and its meaning known to me, you shall be torn limb from limb and your houses confiscated'* (2:5, cf. 3:29). He had not told them the contents of his dream, as Pharaoh had told his dreams to his court diviners. The function of the Chaldean diviners was to interpret phenomena according to well-established procedures and norms, and an extensive literature existed which was consulted and used for this purpose.¹³ These court diviners are not prophets, and fully admit it. *'Let the king relate the dream to his servants, and we will tell its meaning'* (2:7). The court diviners justifiably complain, *'None has asked such a thing of any magician, exorcist, or Chaldean'* (2:10).¹⁴

Execution of Nebuchadnezzar's decree would wipe out Babylon's intellectual elite, and bring to a standstill much of the activity in the empire. Elimination of

these functionaries would leave the administration and populace in a procedural limbo. Moreover, wholesale execution of such an influential class of subjects and expropriation of their property would have raised an outcry and dissent of grave consequences to the King. But, as in the court of Ahasuerus (Est. 8:8), Nebuchadnezzar's decree could not be retracted. The King is now in a tight bind, and needs a face-saving way out in regard to this accusation. He needs a solution that will vindicate his position that the court diviners could have done more than they did, that they should have searched for a solution "out of the box" of their own specific training.¹⁵

At this point, Arioch, the captain of the royal guard, reveals Nebuchadnezzar's position to Daniel, who then appears before the King (Dan. 2:14 ff). It can be assumed that having been in the royal court for at least three years, Daniel has his contacts and understands the workings of the court. He is apparently on friendly terms with Arioch, and has the "pull" to get an audience with the King on a moment's notice and even obtain a postponement of the royal decree of execution (2:16).

One of the things this brilliant court Jew could have learned from Arioch is Nebuchadnezzar's reticence about the details of his disturbing dream. Actually, in Babylon it was thought that for the dreamer to tell the dream was part and parcel of the process for mitigating its effects. Oppenheim says, "the telling of the dream-content removes the influence it has upon the person who experienced it."¹⁶ Nebuchadnezzar, by not telling the dream, subverts the normal process of dream handling, perhaps indicating thereby that he is not in possession of the particulars of his own dream.

Though verse 2:23 implies that Daniel receives details of the dream from God, he could also make close observations of the King that might suggest the nature of the dream. Daniel could have known where the King was and what he saw before the dream, that may have made an impression on his mind and continued to linger in his memory. Dreams often reflect the dreamer's activities during the previous day, and the mind's continued processing of problems that absorbed one's attention during his waking hours. R' Yonathan (TB Berakot 55b) has aptly characterized this type of dream saying, "A man is not shown in his dream anything that he did not think about while awake." It is notable that this type of dream is illustrated in the Talmud by the Daniel's words, '*O king, the thoughts that came to your mind in bed*' (2:29) or '*and that you may know the*

thoughts of your mind' (2:30). A modern reader needs only to read Shelley's "Ozymandias" to realize what images may have plagued Nebuchadnezzar.

The King would be receptive to a face-saving resolution of the crisis. Though given to fits of rage and rash decrees, Nebuchadnezzar must have realized his error and its consequences. Daniel would have been quite right in assuming that the King was desperately looking for a respectable way out of his dilemma. It is even possible that Daniel's meeting with Arioch was prearranged, since the King grants Daniel an audience immediately thereafter.¹⁷ Furthermore, he grants Daniel's request for more time to find the content and interpretation of the dream, which he was apparently loath to do when asked by the court diviners. While the Chaldeans, as the scientists of that time, could not claim supernatural abilities, Daniel and his friends, being foreigners from a strange country, might have prophetic capacities. Perhaps this is why Daniel is introduced as a Judean in exile, not associated with the wise men of Babylon.

For Daniel the alternatives are daring or death. He and his friends face imminent execution, together with all the "wise men" (2:13-14, 17). Anything is better than that. Daniel could gamble that a boldly presented dream and interpretation favorable to the King, obtained in a manner on a par with the King's dream (that is, one in a dream and one in a vision) would be acceptable to Nebuchadnezzar. He never asks, "Am I right about the dream so far?" He makes the presentation with great confidence, saying, '*Such was the dream!*' (2:36), and goes on to the interpretation. He is not shy in his promises to the King, telling him that just a little more time is needed to work on the "meaning," as if hinting that the content of the dream is no longer a problem (2:16). The stratagem works. The King is, obviously, very impressed.

Immersed in such an existential crisis, Daniel must have devoted every minute to the analysis of various possible scenarios. Eventually, in a dream/vision at night, all pieces of the puzzle come together into one whole, a dream of a dream. Daniel does not fake anything, nor is he dishonest in any of his acts. He tells the King what he saw. His dream or vision appears to him as inspired, as the by-product of *ruach hakodesh*, and he thanks God for revealing to him a solution to the crisis.

Daniel's prayer is notably not focused on God's grace, mercy, providence, and so forth. It is entirely devoted to wisdom and knowledge: *wisdom and power are His* (2:20); *He gives the wise their wisdom and knowledge to those*

who know (2:21); *He reveals . . . knows* (2:22); *You who gave me wisdom and power* (2:23); *You have let me know . . . let us know'*(2:23). Daniel employs wisdom and knowledge, and the resolution of the crisis is mediated through these faculties and heavenly inspiration. Daniel's reward is not the position of "chief of the dream interpreters" as indicated in Daniel 4:6, but -- again like Joseph -- that of an administrator, one having "authority over all the province of Babylon" including the function of "chief officer" over all the wise men of Babylon (2:48). It appears that the reward is in kind for service rendered, and Nebuchadnezzar distances himself from the court diviners by cleverly placing the fortunes of the most offended group (wise men of Babylon) in the hands of a man who would have a vested interest in controlling them.

CONCLUSION

In this conjectural analysis, Daniel is characterized as an analyst *par excellence*, an able crisis manager, daring individual, and a man of great confidence in God, but not a prophet.

It has been suggested that the author of the Book of Daniel may have had a different priority in mind, wherein Nebuchadnezzar's dream itself is of little significance, while God's superiority and Daniel's role as a pious Jew in exile are central. Indeed, it has been suggested by Humphreys that the function of the tales in Daniel is to project a "life-style for Diaspora" that affirms the possibility of participating fully in the life of a foreign nation.¹⁸ Daniel and his companions exemplify the advice of Jeremiah to the exiles: *Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile . . . for in its welfare you will find your welfare* (Jer. 29:7).

Chapter 2 depicts a Jew in a critical situation, who goes home and prays with his friends to God, God sends him the solution, and he greatly benefits. This is not the normal behavior of a human being characterized by *that You have made him little less than Divine* (Ps. 8:6). This a caricature of the Jew in exile, not a paradigm for his behavior. Collins, apparently not entirely comfortable with Humphreys's generalization, adds "The situations envisaged in the tales of Daniel would not arise very often in the life of a typical person. The patterns of behavior and priorities advocated, however, were more broadly applicable." He suggests that the purpose of the tales was also to foster group pride, of the kind "One of ours outdid yours!" Jews, deprived of their homeland and

their Temple, could find a substitute source for pride in the success of Daniel and his friends and their superiority in wisdom over the Babylonians.¹⁹ However, such pride in the "local team" is not a paradigm for life in the Diaspora, which was often less than hospitable.

This reasoning leads to the conclusion that the redactor's highlighting of the religious elements in Daniel's behavior was intended to make the point that these elements should **also** be part of the solution. One would have assumed as obvious that a person of Daniel's abilities, knowledge, wisdom, and influence would use them to resolve the dilemmas posed by the dream. At the same time, the tales insist on the importance of fidelity to the Jewish religion and refusal of any compromise with idolatry. It is because of (not despite) their fidelity to their own God that the Jews succeed.

In summary, if Daniel was a prophet, then he was in a category of his own. In that case, his handling of the crisis associated with Nebuchadnezzar's dream only serves to highlight his unusual abilities. However, if Daniel was not a prophet, but a sensitive individual of lofty intellectual and religious qualifications, then it is conceivable that the confluence of court machinations was such that he could have come up with scenarios for a very likely favorable outcome. He told the King what he saw in his vision, but his vision was a by-product of the thought processes that preceded it. If this chapter suggests a paradigm for a "Jew in the Diaspora," it is for a Jew that exploits to the fullest his intellectual abilities, but has the humility to fall on his knees before God. The Jewish history of the Diaspora is replete with such individuals making significant contributions in many fields.

NOTES

1. I refer to the king's magicians, exorcists, sorcerers, and Chaldeans, as "court diviners." The inclusion of the exorcists and sorcerers among those who handled dreams is related to their function of dispelling or removing the evil consequences of the dream.
2. B. Naor, "Joseph and Daniel: Court Jews and Dreamers," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30:1 (2002) pp. 10-16. Naor suggests that in exile the nation has to subdue its dreams and focus on service. Note that according to TB Baba Bathra 15a "The men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther." These great men must have had a purpose in writing these books.
3. I. Abarbanel, *Peyrush al Neviim Ahronim*. (Jerusalem: Books Export Enterprises (Photostat of second edition 1641) p. 271b.
4. J. Daniel Hamburger, in *Real-Encyclopädie für Bibel und Talmud*, Vol I. (1870) 224. Note, however, that Rashi, relying on *Seder Olam Rabbah* includes Daniel in the list of the 48 prophets that

A DREAM OF A DREAM IN DANIEL 2

according to R' Abba Bar Kahana prophesied to Israel (Megilah 14a). Rashi's list does not exactly dovetail with the list in *Seder Olam Rabbah* (See Hagahot HaGra). Also, the midrashic work Mishnath R'Eliezer seems to consider Daniel and his friends as prophets. We read "A dream that is not a prophecy the dreamer has to ask for an interpretation for it, as the dream of Pharaoh (Gen. 41), the dream of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2), the dream of the Midianite (Jud. 7:13); but a dream that is a prophecy, though its content may be confusing, the prophet does not have to ask for an interpretation, as Daniel and his friends" (Ch. N. Bialik and Y. Ch. Ravnitzky, *Sefer Ha'agada*, (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1987) p. 371, para. 49.

5. M. Cohen, (ed.). *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Haketer', Psalms*. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2003) pp. 36-37. Kimchi says: "We explain in short the difference between prophecy and *Ruach Hakodesh*. Prophecy is something that comes to a person who is wise and perfect of character, prophecy would come to him in a dream; and when it comes to him while awake, he becomes senseless, removed from all that goes on in this world, and he sees in the vision of prophecy as if a person speaks with him and says so an so, or he sees some phenomena in that vision, or he sees no image but hears a voice speaking with him. And *Ruach Hakodesh* is when a perfect person deals with Godly things, perfect in all his senses, losing none of them; and says whatever he says normally, but he is stirred by a heavenly spirit that make words form on his tongue, words of praise and thanks to God or words of wisdom and ethics, he could also speak about the future, with the heavenly assistance upon his spiritual contemplation." A short discussion of some rationalist views on prophecy are discussed by L. Magarik, "Three Rationalist Explanations of Prophecy," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 30:1 (2002) pp. 32-40.

6. Ibid. Kimchi refers probably to Daniel's inability to "maintain strength" when he awoke from his dreams, as indicated in Dan iel 10:8.

7. Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (Dover, 1956) p. 243.

8. Ibid.

9. L. Ginzberg, "Daniel,," *The Jewish Encyclopædia*, Vol 4. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1903) p. 428.

10. S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969) p. 150.

11. E.L. Ehrlich, *Der Traum im Alten Testament*. (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1958) pp. 151ff.

12. A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Vol II. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003) p. 241.

13. For instance, some of these court diviners specialized in the interpretation of dreams, for which there were dream books. See A.L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East, with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book*. (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philological Society, 1956). Excerpts from such books may have found their way into the Talmud (TB Berakot 56a-57a). Many cuneiform tablets dating back to the seventh century BCE and onwards were found, which contain description of actual practices of wizardry that was the custom of the age. The great library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh holds vast amounts of information of Assyrian magic and sorcery.

14. J.J. Collins, *Daniel*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) p. 157. Collins misses this point. He says, "It is remarkable here that the Chaldeans do not turn to the gods for help, either by prayer or ritual. Their failure to do so is contrived to sharpen the contrast with Daniel." As the scientists of their time, they could only use the tools of their trade.

15. Ibid. Collins says, "Such skepticism toward omens and their interpreters is rare in the ancient

Near East but not unknown." It is doubtful that skepticism in the court diviners' professional capability is at work here, since the King accepts with great respect Daniel's interpretation. As a king, Nebuchadnezzar wants a solution to his problem, not a recitation on what they can or cannot do. Their charge that no one can solve his problem seems to him as being "fraudulent" and a product of "collusion."

16. Oppenheim, p. 219.

17. Bruno Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1920) p. 170. The difficulty of access to the king comes clearly through in Esther 4:11.

18. W.L. Humphreys, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973) pp. 222-23. See also S. Bakon, "Daniel." *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28:3 (2000) p. 157.

19. Collins, p. 51.

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