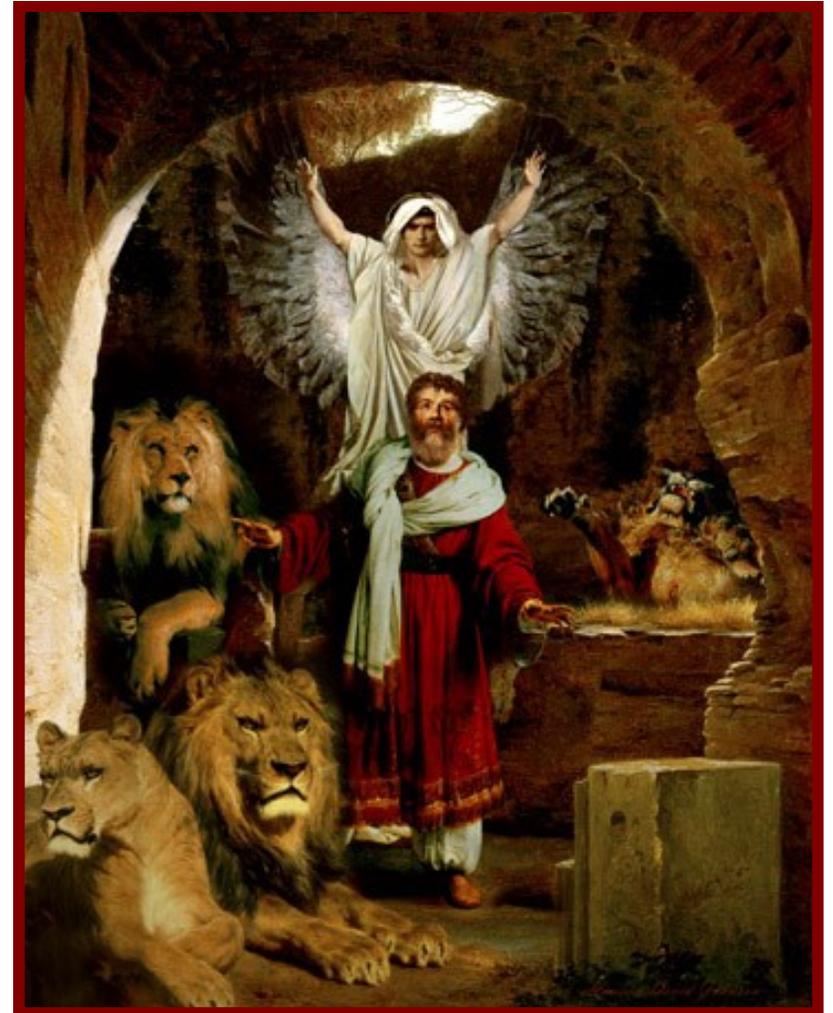


The Book of Daniel

Chapter 4



The Book of Daniel, as it now stands in the ordinary Hebrew Bibles, is generally divided into two main parts. The first includes a series of narratives which are told in the third person and the second, a series of visions which are described in the first person. From its content it readily appears that the Book of Daniel does not have as its objective a summary historical account of the period of the Babylonian Exile, or of the life of Daniel himself. The contents of the Prophecy of Daniel are of a peculiar kind which has no exact parallel in the Bible, except in the Apocalypse of St. John.

Commentary of the Book of Daniel is by Saint Jerome. St. Jerome, who was born Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, and is the most learned of the Fathers of the Western Church. The Church regards him as the greatest of all the doctors in clarifying the Divine Word. While at Rome he made a revision of the current Latin New Testament, and of the Psalms. Then he undertook to translate most of the books of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew. The only parts of the Latin Bible, now known as the Vulgate, which were not either translated or worked over by him are the Books of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and the two Books of the Maccabees. In the sixteenth century the great Council of Trent pronounced Jerome's Vulgate the authentic and authoritative Latin text of the Catholic Church, without, however, thereby implying a preference for it above the original text or above versions in other languages. In 1907 Pope Pius X entrusted to the Benedictine Order the office of restoring as far as possible the correct text of St. Jerome's Vulgate, which during fifteen centuries of use had naturally become altered in many places. The Bible now ordinarily used by English-speaking Catholics is a translation of the Vulgate, made at Rheims and Douay towards the end of the sixteenth century, and revised by Bishop Challoner in the eighteenth century. The Confraternity Edition of the New Testament appearing in 1950 represents a complete revision.

Chapter 4

Verse 98ff. (=1ff.) [The Hebrew Bible continues chap. III up through what is IV:3 in the English Bible] *"Nebuchadnezzar the king unto all the peoples, nations and languages who dwell upon the whole earth: peace be multiplied unto you. The Most High God hath performed signs and wonders towards me. Therefore I have thought it well to declare His signs, for they are great, and His marvels, for they are mighty, and His kingdom, because it is (the Vulgate omits "because it is") an eternal kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation."* The epistle of Nebuchadnezzar was inserted in the volume of the prophet, in order that the book might not afterwards be thought to have been manufactured by some other author, as the accuser (Porphyry) falsely asserts, but the product of Daniel himself.

Verse 1 (=4). "I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace." The narrative is clear indeed and requires but little interpretation. Because he displeased God, Nebuchadnezzar was turned into a madman and dwelt for seven years amongst the brute beasts and was fed upon the roots of herbs. Afterwards by the mercy of God he was restored to his throne, and praised and glorified the King of heaven, on the ground that all His works are truth and His ways are justice and He is able to abase those who walk in pride. But there are some who claim to understand by the figure of Nebuchadnezzar the hostile power which the Lord speaks of in the Gospel, saying: "I beheld Satan falling from heaven like lightning" (Luke 10:18). Likewise John in *Revelation*, in the passage where the dragon falls upon the earth drawing a third of the stars with him (Rev. 12). Likewise Isaiah: "How hath the morning star fallen, which used to rise early in the morning" (Isa. 14:22). These authorities assert that it was absolutely impossible for a man who was reared in luxury to subsist on hay for seven years and to dwell among wild beasts for seven years without being at all mangled by them. Also they ask how the imperial authority could have been kept waiting for a mere madman, and how so mighty a kingdom could have gone without a king for so long a period. If, on the other hand, anyone had succeeded him on the throne, how foolish he would have to be thought to surrender an imperial authority which he had possessed for so long. Such a thing would be especially incredible since the historical records of the Chaldeans contain no such record, and since they recorded matters of far less import, it is impossible that they should have left things of major importance unmentioned. And so they pose all of these questions and offer as their own reply the proposition that since the episode does not stand up as genuine history, the figure of Nebuchadnezzar represents the devil. To this position we make not the slightest concession; otherwise everything we read in Scripture may appear to be imperfect representations and mere fables. For once men have lost their reason, who would not perceive them to lead their existence like brutish animals in the open fields and forest regions? And to pass over all other considerations, since Greek and Roman history offer episodes far more incredible, such as Scylla and the Chimaera, the Hydra and the Centaurs, and the birds and wild beasts and flowers and trees, the stars and the stones into which men are related to have been transformed, what is so remarkable about the execution of such a divine judgment as this for the manifestation of God's power and the humbling of the pride of kings? Nebuchadnezzar says, "I was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. . . ." or as Theodotion renders it "upon my throne." Now those who follow the interpretation we are opposing understand by the devil's home this world of ours. Concerning the world Satan himself in the Gospel says to the Savior: "All these things have been given over to me" (Matt. 4:9). Likewise the Apostle says: "The world lieth in the Wicked One" (I John 5).

Verse 2 (=5). "I beheld a dream which terrified me, and my thoughts while upon my bed. . . ." Let our opponents answer what kind of a dream the hostile power [i.e., Satan] would have seen, unless perhaps everything he appears to possess in this world is a mere shadowy dream.

" *'And the visions of my head greatly disturbed me.'* " Note how Nebuchadnezzar realized that his visions were not those of his eyes and heart, but rather of his head, because it was for the glory of God's future servants that these secrets were being revealed to him.

Verse 6 (=8). " *'Then at last my associate, Daniel, whose name according to the name of my god is Belteshazzar, entered before my presence.'* " With the exception of the Septuagint translators (who for some reason or other have omitted this whole passage [i.e., vv. 6-9]), the other three translators [Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion] have translated the word [i.e. 'oh°rdn, a dubious word generally rendered as "at last" by modern translations, but here probably to be construed as "another"] as "associate" (*collega*). Consequently by the judgment of the teachers of the Church, the Septuagint edition has been rejected in the case of this book, and it is the translation of Theodotion which is commonly read, since it agrees with the Hebrew as well as with the other translators. Wherefore also Origen asserts in the ninth book of the *Stromata* that he is discussing the text from this point on in the prophecy of Daniel, not as it appears in the Septuagint, which greatly differs from the Hebrew original, but rather as it appears in Theodotion's edition.

" *' . . . (Daniel) who has within him the spirit of the holy gods; and I related the dream unto him....'* " Corresponding to the rendering here given, "of the holy god," we read in Chaldee (in which *Daniel* was composed) the word *selain cadisin* ('-l-h-y-n q-d-y-sh-y-n) [vocalized this would be *'elahin qaddishin*], which means "holy gods" and not "holy God," as Theodotion rendered it. Nor is it surprising if Nebuchadnezzar made such a mistake, and supposed that any force he perceived to be higher than himself were gods, rather than God. Lastly he states also in his following words:

" *'Belteshazzar, thou chief of the soothsayers, whom I know to possess within thee the spirit of the holy gods.'* " Belteshazzar was chief of the soothsayers or enchanters, as others have rendered it. It is not surprising if he had been appointed chief over all the soothsayers since he had at the king's order been taught the wisdom of the Chaldeans, and had besides been found ten times wiser than all the rest. Let us ask of those who do not concede any historical basis for this vision, what Nebuchadnezzar it was who saw the dream, and who the Daniel was who declared his dream and foretold things to come. And how did it come to pass that this same Daniel (whose fortitude was, at least according to them, to be understood as divine in origin) was appointed chief of the soothsayers by Nebuchadnezzar, and called his companion?

Verse 33 (=36). " *'And my nobles and officers sought me out and I was restored to my kingdom, and all the greater magnificence accrued to me.'* " Well then, according to those who argue against the historical character of this account, all the angelic powers are going to seek out the devil again, and he will increase to such a degree of might, that the very one who formerly exalted himself against God is going to be greater than he was before his sin.

Verse 34 (=37). " *'Now therefore I, Nebuchadnezzar, do praise, magnify and glorify the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways are judgment, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.'* " Nebuchadnezzar understood the reason why he had suffered in seven years' punishment, and for that reason he humbled himself, since he had exalted himself against God.

End of Chapter 4

Verses 28, 29 (=31, 32). "While the saying was yet in the king's mouth, a voice from heaven assailed him: 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken, thy kingdom shall pass away (variant reading: is passing away) from thee and they shall cast thee forth from among mankind.'" His arrogant boasting is immediately punished by the Lord. For this reason the execution of the sentence is not delayed, lest mercy towards the poor seem to have profited him not at all. But as soon as he has spoken in pride, he straightway loses the kingdom which had been reserved for him on account of his works of charity.

"...until thou dost recognize that the Most High reigns in the kingdom of men." In misery it comes as a great consolation to know, when one is in a painful situation, that a more favorable future will ensue. Yet Nebuchadnezzar's fury and madness were so pronounced that in time of affliction he would not have remembered the blessings which God had promised him.

Verse 31 (=34). "I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted mine eyes toward heaven, and my intelligence returned to me." Had he not raised his eyes towards heaven, he would not have regained his former intelligence. Moreover, when he says that his intelligence returned to him, he shows that he had lost not his outward appearance but only his mind.

"And His kingdom is from generation to generation." If we accept this expression in the Scriptures, "From generation to generation," as simply for what it is, then it unquestionably means "for all time to come." But if, on the other hand, "generation and generation" signifies (as we have often asserted) two generations, that of the Law and that of the Gospel, the question comes up as to how Nebuchadnezzar would have known of the unrevealed secrets ("sacraments") of God. [The original for "from generation to generation" is "im dar w^edar," i.e., "with generation and generation," which Jerome renders as "in generatione et generatione" or "in generation and generation." Undoubtedly the idea of the original is distributive or successive: "unto each successive generation." Jerome's explanation of this characteristic Semitic phrase as an occult reference to the two dispensations of the Old and New Testaments seems very farfetched.] But perhaps we might say this, that after he raised his eyes towards heaven and received back his former estate and exalted and blessed the ever-living God, he would not have failed to know this secret also.

Verse 32 (=35). "For He does according to His will, just as among the powers of heaven, so also among the inhabitants of the earth. ..." This too Nebuchadnezzar expresses like a worldling. For God does not simply do what He wishes, but rather God wishes only that which is good. Nebuchadnezzar, however, expressed himself in this way, in order that even while he declared God's power, he might appear to impugn God's justice, on the ground that he had suffered unmerited punishment.

Verse 7 (=10). "I saw, and behold there was a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was very great. ..." It was not only of Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Chaldeans, but also of all impious men that the prophet says: "I beheld the impious man highly exalted and lifted up like the cedars of Lebanon" (Ps. 36:35). [This is Ps. 37:35 in the English Bible, and preserves a different reading, taken over from the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew reading: "... and spreading himself like a green tree in its native soil."] Such men are lifted up, not by the greatness of their virtues, but by their own pride; and for that reason they are cut down and fall into ruin. Therefore it is good to follow the teaching of our Lord in the Gospel: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). But as for the fact that, according to Theodotion (p. 515), he mentions his *kutos* or height ---- or else his *kureia*, as he himself later renders it, that is to say, his *dominion* (a word we have translated as "his appearance") ---- those same detractors of the historicity of this passage slanderously assert that Nebuchadnezzar's dominion never possessed the entire world. He did not rule over the Greeks or barbarians, or over all of the nations in the north and west, but only over the provinces of the East; that is to say, over Asia, not over Europe or Libya. Consequently all these slanders require to be understood as attributable to the devil, for actually we ourselves should accept all this as spoken by way of hyperbole, having in view the arrogance of the impious king, who in Isaiah (chap. 14) makes as great a boast as this, claiming that he possesses the very heaven itself, and the whole earth besides, as if it were a nest full of birds' eggs.

Verses 10, 11 (=13, 14). "And behold, a watchman and a holy one descended from heaven, and he cried out with a loud voice and spoke as follows: 'Cut down the tree and chop off its branches. . .'" Instead of "watchman" Theodotion uses the Chaldee word itself, *hir*, which is written with the three letters 'ayin, yodh, and resh. But it signifies the angels, because they ever keep watch and are prepared to carry out God's command. And so we too follow the example of the angels in their duties when we engage in frequent night-long vigils. Also it is said of the Lord: "He who keepeth Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 120:4, i.e. Ps. 121:4). Lastly, we read a little later: "In the decision of the watchmen, i.e., the angels, lies the decree and the speech and the petition of the holy ones." Moreover it is both Greek and Latin usage to call the rainbow *iris*, because it is said to descend to earth in a multicolored arch.

Verse 16 (=19). "Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, began quietly to meditate by himself for about an hour, and his meditations greatly troubled him. And the king answered and said, 'Belteshazzar, let not the dream or its interpretation disturb you.' Belteshazzar answered and said...." Daniel silently understood that the dream was directed against the king, and the pallor of his countenance showed forth the fear in his heart, and he felt sorry for the man who had conferred upon him the greatest of honor. And to avoid all appearance of taunting the king or glorying over

him as an enemy, he only told him what he understood of the matter after he had begged to be excused.

" *'My lord, (C) may this dream apply to those who hate thee, and its interpretation to thy foes.'*" And so Nebuchadnezzar, seeing that Daniel was afraid of appearing to speak something of ill omen and against the king's interest, urged him to speak out plainly and truly what he understood of the matter without any apprehension.

Verse 17 (=20). " *'The lofty and vigorous tree which thou sawest, the height of which reached the heavens. . . .'*" He explains the truth without insulting the king, so as to avoid appearing to charge the king with sinful pride, but rather with overweening greatness.

Verse 20 (=23). " *'Let him be bound with iron and with brass in the grass out of doors, and let him be sprinkled with dew of heaven, and let his feeding be with the wild beasts, until seven times pass over him.'*" It was also written to the same effect above. And so those who object to the historicity of the narrative ask us how Nebuchadnezzar would have been bound with chains of iron and brass, or who would have bound him or tied him up with fetters. Yet it is very clear that all maniacs are bound with chains to keep them from destroying themselves or attacking others with weapons.

Verses 21, 22 (=24, 25). " *'This is the interpretation of the sentence of the Most High which has come upon my lord the king. They shall cast thee forth from among men and thy habitation shall be with cattle and wild beasts. . . .'*" Daniel moderates the severity of the sentence by complimentary language, so that (variant: and) after he has first set forth the harsher aspects, he may moderate the king's alarm by assurances of the kindlier treatment to follow. He draws the final inference:

Verse 23 (=26). " *'Thy kingdom shall remain unto thee, after thou shalt have acknowledged that power belongs to Heaven.'*" Those who contest the historicity of this incident and would have it that the devil's original position of honor will be restored to him, make capital of this passage, on the ground that after Nebuchadnezzar has during the seven-year cycle endured torments and bestialization, feeding upon grass and hay, he makes a confession of the Lord and becomes the person he was before. But they are bound to answer the question how it can be consistent for the angels who have never fallen to have someone rule over them once more who has only through repentance been restored to favor.

Verse 24 (=27). " *'Wherefore, O king, let my counsel meet with thy favor, and make up for thy sins by deeds of charity, (649) and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps God will forgive thy transgressions.'*" "Since he had previously pronounced the sentence of God, which of course cannot be altered, how could he exhort the king to deeds of charity and acts of mercy towards the poor? This difficulty is easily solved by reference to the example of King Hezekiah, who Isaiah had said was going to die; and again, to the example of the Ninevites, to whom it was said: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be destroyed" (Jonah 3). And yet the sentence of God was changed in response to the prayers of Hezekiah and the city of Nineveh, not by any means because of the ineffectualness of the judgment itself but because of the conversion of those who merited pardon. Moreover in Jeremiah God states that He threatens evil for the nation (Jer. 23), but if it does that which is good, He will alter His threats to bestow mercy. Again, He affirms that He directs His promises to the man who does good; and if the same man thereafter works evil, He says that He changes His decision, not with regard to the men themselves, but with regard to their works which have thus changed in character. For after all, God is not angered at men but at their sins; and when no sins inhere in a man, God by no means inflicts a punishment which has been commuted. In other words, let us say that Nebuchadnezzar performed deeds of mercy toward the poor in accordance with Daniel's advice, and for that reason the sentence against him was delayed of execution for twelve months. But because he afterwards while walking about in his palace at Babylon said boastfully: "Is this not the great Babylon (A) which I myself have built up as a home for the king by the might of my power and the glory of my name?" therefore he lost the virtue of his charitableness by reason of the wickedness of his pride.

"*It may be that God will forgive thy sins.*" In view of the fact that the blessed Daniel, foreknowing the future as he did, had doubts concerning God's decision, it is very rash on the part of those who boldly promise pardon to sinners. And yet it should be recognized that indulgence was promised to Nebuchadnezzar in return, as long as he wrought good works. Much more, then, is it promised to other men who have committed less grievous sins than he. We read in Jeremiah also of God's direction to the people of the Jews, that they should pray for the Babylonians, inasmuch as the peace of the captives was bound up with the peace of the captors themselves.