

1 Daniel 1-2

1:1–6:29. These chapters deal with Daniel at the court of the kings of Babylon—Nebuchadnezzar (1:1–4:37), Belshazzar (chap. 5) and Darius the Mede (chap. 6). These three reigns, arranged in a line as if they really followed one another, cover the entire period from the start of the Babylonian captivity to the arrival of Cyrus of Persia, who allowed the Jews to return to their homeland (cf. 1:21). The main themes running through these chapters are: 1) divine protection afforded Daniel and his companions; 2) the help that these young Jews render the kings; 3) their faithfulness to the Lord despite trials and ordeals; 4) the acknowledgment of the God of Israel by these pagan kings. In the overall context of the book, these first six chapters introduce the God of Israel and Daniel, who will later receive a revelation about the end of the world. They also provide the Jews of the Diaspora with a model of how a Jew in a pagan society ought to live. For that reason, the Church will read them with interest because she lives in the midst of the world and “realizes that she is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 1).

1:1–4:37. Nebuchadnezzar was the king who was responsible for the deportation of the Jews, and the most famous of the Babylonian kings. That may explain why he gets so much space in the book: Daniel interprets two dreams for him (2:1–49; 4:1–37), and the king three times acknowledges the God of Israel (2:46–49; 4:1–3; 4:37). Each episode in these chapters is an independent unit, and they all combine to show the qualities that Daniel and these other Jews had: they were accomplished people, successful in life; at the same time they stayed true to God, even when their religion was put to the test.

1:1–21. This chapter acts as an introduction to the whole book. It tells us who Daniel was and how he and his companions became members of Nebuchadnezzar’s household. The dates given at the start and finish of the chapter (vv. 1, 21) show that Daniel was connected with the whole period of the exile.

1:1–7. The Hebrew word translated as “eunuch” (v. 3) is *sa-rîs*, which could refer to any palace officials or guards, not necessarily eunuchs. The country of Shinar is Babylonia, which is how the Greek version translates the name. It was quite common in the ancient East for a victorious

king to appoint state officials from among the noblemen of subject peoples; Jewish officials, for example, could be very useful in dealings with Jewish communities.

1:8–16. The sacred writer extends Jewish regulations about food (cf. 1 Mac 1:62) to wine, to show that keeping to the Jewish law was much better for the youths than eating the king’s fare would have been. Besides, to eat and drink at the royal table would have involved eating and drinking things offered to the gods; it would have been a form of communing with pagan gods. As those young men saw it, being good Jews was not incompatible with the performance of duties for which they were trained. Similarly, “to remind a Christian that his life is meaningless unless he obeys God’s will does not mean separating him from other men” (St Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, 21).

God can afford protection by making use of people’s good dispositions; here he causes the chief eunuch to be well-disposed to the Jewish youths (v. 9). Thus, “though often unconscious collaborators with God’s will, men can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers and their sufferings” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 307).

1:17–21. Although Daniel and his companions are given a very good Chaldean education, their wisdom comes from God, not from that training (v. 17). It includes the understanding of all things human and, in Daniel’s case, the ability to interpret dreams and visions. The king will soon see for himself that Daniel and the Jews have greater wisdom than others, but he does not yet know where it comes from (he will, later: cf. 2:47). But the Jewish or Christian reader of the book does know what the source of this true wisdom is: “God’s truth is his wisdom, which commands the whole created order and governs the world (cf. Wis 13:1–9). God, who alone made heaven and earth (cf. Ps 115:15), can alone impart true knowledge of every created thing in relation to himself” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 216).

Summing up the career of these Jewish youths in Babylon, and aware that their wisdom came from the Word of God, St Hippolytus of Rome comments: “It was the Word who gave them wisdom and made them faithful witnesses [to him] in Babylon, so that through them what was worshipped in Babylon would be scorned. Nebuchadnezzar was defeated by three young men whose faith was tested in the fires of the furnace; the holy woman Susanna was delivered from the jaws of death; and the terrible depth of ancient evil was laid bare. These were the

victories won by four young men in Babylon; they were beloved of God and nurtured the fear of the Lord in their hearts” (*Commentarium in Daniele*, 1, 11).

2:1–49. This whole episode is constructed very well from a literary point of view. Tension is first built up, and then gradually resolved. First, the writer describes a real quandary: the king asks for the impossible; he wants to be told what he dreamt and what the dream means (2:1–12). Daniel prays for God’s help and is able to tell the king the content of the dream and its interpretation (2:13–45). Finally, the king acknowledges the God of Daniel (2:46–49). It is now clear that God has indeed given Daniel the power to interpret dreams (cf. 1:17); and by using this gift Daniel has saved the lives of the wise men of Babylon, and the king confesses the “God of gods”.

The time given at the start of the chapter (2:1) does not tie in with what the previous chapter implied—about Daniel spending at least three years of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign as a trainee before becoming one of the learned men of the kingdom (cf. 1:5, 18, 20). It implies that the author is not interested in historical detail and that he is probably making a collection of existing stories about Daniel as an interpreter of dreams.

2:1–12. In ancient times, dreams were thought to be a channel for divine messages about the future. This passage is reminiscent of the dreams that Joseph interpreted for the pharaoh of Egypt (cf. Gen 41:1–36). Daniel seems to be superior to Joseph, because not only does he interpret the dream but he discovers the dream’s content by means of a divine revelation; as the Chaldeans put it, “not a man on earth” could meet the king’s demand (2:10–11). “Chaldeans” is one of the many terms used to describe professional astrologers, magicians, (magi) etc. Outside Babylon, the name was applied to itinerant Mesopotamian soothsayers who tried to make a living by their craft (in fact, the craft is supposed to have originated in that region). The magi admit that only the gods could meet the king’s demands (v. 11): this is in fact a clue as to what is going to happen. The Chaldeans are acknowledging that man’s intellectual capacity has its limits; cf. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 42.

2:13–24. Although Daniel does not seem to have been consulted by the king, he and his companions are going to share the same fate as the Chaldean wise men. It does not make much sense; but what the author wants to show is that there is solidarity between Daniel and those

magi, and to prepare the way for Daniel to intervene and save the lives of all of them. The tone of the story is ironic.

Daniel intervenes in three ways—first, with prudence and discretion (vv. 14–16); then, by prayer (vv. 17–23); and finally by revealing the dream to the king (vv. 27–45). Daniel acts prudently by going first to the captain of the guard, just as he had done earlier (cf. 1:8–16), and thereby gaining time.

The simple and humble prayer made by Daniel and his companions obtains what the human mind cannot. When God enlightens Daniel in this nocturnal vision he gives him the gift of prophecy, whereas all that the king sees in his dreams are mental pictures (cf. 2:28, 31). Daniel, conscious that he has received that gift, breaks into a prayer of thanksgiving, proclaiming God’s sovereignty over the physical world and over the affairs of mankind, and his goodness in answering the prayer of those who believe in him (vv. 20–23). Light is used a symbol (v. 22) to indicate that there are no limits to God’s knowledge; it extends even to what will happen in the future.

2:25–35. Daniel claims no personal credit for knowing the content of the king’s dream; he makes it plain that God revealed the secret to him; only God knows what will happen in the “latter times” (vv. 27–28). We have entered the area of divine revelation, which is what this book is all about—the world of the End time, which as yet exists only in the mind of God. Our Lord himself will say that “of that day and hour no one knows ...” (Mt 24:36).

Daniel uses the opportunity to lead the king to the true God, the God of heaven, who knows all mysteries.

In line with the thread of the story, Daniel first tells the king about the content of his dream (2:31–35) and then interprets it (3:13–22). The king’s vision is full of symbolism. In the Bible, statues connote idolatry, insofar as they are graven images (cf. Ex 32), even though the passage does not expressly say that the image is an idol. As one moves from head to feet, the metals used in the statue decrease in value. In contrast with the materials of the statue are the stone and the mountain, symbols of solidity and stability. The interpretation reads the metals as representative of the various kingdoms. This is a classical symbolic image: Hesiod, a Greek historian of the eighth-to-seventh century BC, in his book *Works and Days*, 199–201, had used the very same metals and in the same order to signify periods of history; something similar is to be found in Polybius (*Historia*, 38, 22) and other classical authors. Now, in Daniel’s vision, the

four metals all appear together, at the same time, so to speak—a sign that, for God, history is all of a piece.

The image with “feet of clay” (vv. 32–33) is often taken as a reminder that human nature is frail and that nevertheless it is endowed with precious gifts from God: “Our Lord and our God: how great you are! It is you who give our life supernatural meaning and divine vitality. For love of your Son, you cause us to say with all our being, with our body and soul: ‘He must reign!’ And this we do against the background of our weakness, for you know that we are creatures made of clay—and what creatures! Not just feet of clay, but heart and head too” (St Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, 181).

2:36–45. Daniel is not being sycophantic (sycophant – a lackey, or a toady) by addressing the king as he does in vv. 37–38; he is simply saying that the king has an impressive empire because he has been given it by God, who rules over all things; he wants the king to see that the power and glory that he enjoys are part of God’s plans. The other metals (silver, bronze, iron), as one can deduce from the rest of the book, stand for the empires of the Medes, Persians and Greeks, though that interpretation is not perfectly clear because the silver could stand for the empire of the Medes and Persians together. The divided kingdom made of clay and iron is a reference to the Greek empire after the death of Alexander the Great (cf. 11:4) and to the political marriages made between the Seleucid (Asian) and Ptolemaic (Egyptian) Greeks (Antiochus II marrying Bernice; Ptolemy V marrying Cleopatra: cf. 11:6, 17) that failed to bring about unity or union. This passage would have been composed when the Seleucids and Lagids were at loggerheads, and it was against the same background that the prophecy about the end of time seeing the establishment by God of an everlasting kingdom was made (God’s action is symbolized by the stone that strikes the image; there is no sign of any human power at work). It does not say here who will be given the kingdom, but in the light of 7:26 and the fact that it says that the kingdom will not be left to another people (v. 44), the implication is that it will be given to faithful Israelites.

The symbol of the stone has a messianic dimension insofar as it is the means by which the everlasting kingdom will be established and the previous kingdoms destroyed. There are echoes here of images in other prophetic works and in the psalms. Isaiah speaks of God as a “stone of offence”, a stumbling-block for Israel (cf. Is 8:14) and in Psalm 118:22 the people of God are compared to a stone which the builders have rejected and which has become the cornerstone. In

the New Testament that stone is Christ, and the kingdom which he ushers in is the Kingdom of God which will be taken from Israel, to be given to another people that will produce fruit (cf. Mt 21:42–43); Christ also says that anyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces (cf. Lk 20:17–18). Using this Christological interpretation of the stone, some Fathers interpret the mountain from which the stone comes as being the Blessed Virgin, and the stone cut off “by no human hand” as an image of the conception of Jesus in the Virgin’s womb without the involvement of a man: “When Daniel says that the one who inherits the eternal kingdom is *like a son of man*, who can he mean, if not the Lord himself? For he was born of a woman, *like a son of man*, but he showed that his life and power were not of human origin. To say that he is a stone that moves under no external force is a mysterious description: it means that Christ is not the fruit of the work and will of men; he is the fruit of the providence of God, the Father of the universe” (St Justin, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, 76, 1).

The interpretation of the dream, the message it contains, would interest the reader of the book—but not Nebuchadnezzar, who died centuries earlier. It describes how, after the kingdoms of this world which succeed one another over the course of history, an everlasting kingdom will be established by God himself—a kingdom surpassing any that man could create. A Christian will read this as heralding the Kingdom of Christ, although that will not be an earthly, political kingdom, but a spiritual one, as Jesus will tell Pilate at his trial: “My kingship is not of this world” (Jn 18:36).

2:46–49. There is an important lesson in this scene. Nebuchadnezzar, “the king of kings” (2:37), does homage to Daniel, a person of no great importance, and treats him as if he were a messenger from God. The king acknowledges the absolute sovereignty of the God of Israel—which makes Nebuchadnezzar a model for all Gentiles—and, by confessing that God reveals mysteries to Daniel, he is saying that the wisdom that comes from God is incomparably greater than that of the wise men of Babylon. The implication is that the king himself realizes that soothsaying is of no use.¹

¹ Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T. (Eds.). (2005). [*Major Prophets*](#) (pp. 802–813). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.