

IN THE SECOND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR (DANIEL 2:1)

ZVI RON

The second chapter of the Book of Daniel details Daniel's rise to prominence in the court of Nebuchadnezzar as a result of being able to interpret the king's dream when none of the court magicians were able to do so. The chapter begins, *In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream; his spirit was agitated...* (Daniel 2:1). This verse is very problematic because it does not fit in to the chronology established in the first chapter of Daniel.

Daniel 1 describes how *In the third year of the reign of King Jehoakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it* (Dan. 1:1). King Nebuchadnezzar ordered Ashpenaz to kidnap *some Israelites of royal descent and of the nobility* (Dan. 1:3) to be trained for the king's service (Dan. 1:5). Included among these young men was Daniel (Dan. 1:6). The course of training was three years long (Dan. 1:5), after which Daniel was tested and entered the service of King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:18-21). Thus, before Daniel joined the court, at least three years of Nebuchadnezzar's rule had passed. The events of Daniel chapter 2, with Daniel already part of the court, could not have taken place as written, *In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar*.¹

The majority of modern Bible scholars assume that this dating is a remnant of an older story about Daniel which was later sloppily incorporated into the text we have before us. "The date may have already been in the older story that our author incorporated as chapter 2 of his book, and he was not concerned about his historical accuracy."²

Some scholars explain that Daniel had indeed not completed his three year training period, and for this reason he was not called in to interpret the king's dream along with the other wise men.³ However, the plain sense of the text indicates that the events of chapter 2 follow chronologically the end of the

Zvi Ron received semikhah from the Israeli Rabbanut and his Ph.D. in Jewish Theology from Spertus University. He is an educator living in Neve Daniel, Israel, and the author of Sefer Katan ve-Gadol (Rossi Publications: 2006) about the large and small letters in Tanakh. He is the Editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.

training and interview with Nebuchadnezzar described at the end of Daniel chapter 1.⁴ Other suggestions are that perhaps part of a year of the training period was counted as a full year, or that the regnal years of Nebuchadnezzar are calculated differently than the years of training,⁵ or that Nebuchadnezzar began governing during the reign of his father and only later officially became the king.⁶

There are two Greek translations of Daniel preserved in the Septuagint. Theodotion has chapter two of Daniel take place in *the second year of his reign* as in the Masoretic Text. However the Old Greek has a different version of the verse which resolves the chronological difficulty, the events take place in *the twelfth year of Nabouchodonosor's reign*.⁷ This version was accepted by Early Church Fathers as well as modern scholars, attributing the phrase *second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar* to scribal error.⁸

Traditional rabbinic commentaries eschew explanations based on slipshod editing or textual emendations. *Seder Olam Rabbah*, an early rabbinic work already quoted in the Talmud, deals with chronological matters. In commenting on the difficulty posed by Daniel 2:1, *Seder Olam* explains, "Scripture counts the years after the destruction of the Temple."⁹ Meaning that the verse is not counting the years from the time Nebuchadnezzar actually became king of Babylonia, but rather the number of years since he destroyed the Temple. This explanation is almost universally the one presented in rabbinic commentaries, including R. Saadia Gaon,¹⁰ Rashi, Malbim and the *Da'at Mikra* commentary. Pseudo-Saadia (to Dan. 2:1) explains that this method of chronology makes sense because "when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem the text raised him up as if he became king at that time."

Ibn Ezra (on Dan. 2:1) explains that *the second year of the reign* refers to the number of years since Nebuchadnezzar conquered many countries, thus expanding his empire greatly. This approach may already be seen in Josephus, who explains the second year as "two years after the sacking of Egypt."¹¹ R. Manasseh ben Israel, in his 15th century work *The Conciliator*, which seeks to reconcile contradictions within the Bible, combines the approach in *Seder Olam* with this view. He explains that "after conquering Judea in the space of two years, he subdued Ammon, Egypt, Moab, and twenty one nations, as related by Jeremiah, remaining then universal monarch. Proud of his grandeur, the Lord showed him in dreams that his monarchy would

shortly terminate and others succeed it, as experience has shown."¹² Thus, two years after the destruction of the Temple coincided with the expansion of the Babylonian empire, so it makes sense why Nebuchadnezzar was shown the dream at this time.

Even accepting this traditional approach, why would the Bible purposely use a misleading statement, *In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar*, leading to an obvious chronological difficulty? There is one important element not noted by all these commentaries which sheds additional light on this verse.

The parallels between the Daniel and Joseph narratives are well known and well documented. Broadly, in both narratives, a young Israelite described as being good looking (Gen. 39:6; Dan. 1:4) is taken into captivity, yet ultimately rises to prominence after interpreting the king's dream. There are significant parallels particularly between Daniel 2 and Genesis 41. In both narratives the king is described as agitated (Gen. 41:8, Dan. 2:1). In both the king and his court are unable interpret the dream (Gen. 41:8, Dan. 2:1-11). In both, the Israelite hero has someone at court who presents him to the king (the cupbearer in Genesis 41:9-13, Ariokh in Daniel 2:25). In both narratives the Israelite dream interpreter states that the interpretation of dreams rests with God (Gen. 40:8; Dan. 2:28) and that God makes known what will come to pass (Gen. 41:25; Dan. 2:28). Both end with the hero promoted/rewarded by the king (Gen. 41:39-45, Dan. 2:48).¹³

These parallels set the stage for commentators throughout history to make connections and comparisons between the Joseph and Daniel narratives. For example, *Midrash Tanhuma* (Miketz 2) compares the agitation felt by Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar after their respective dreams. Since the word used to describe the agitation of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:1 *va-titpa'em ruho*) is almost the same as that used for Pharaoh (Gen. 41:8 *va-tippa'em ruho*) except for one additional letter, we learn that Nebuchadnezzar was more agitated than Pharaoh, since he could not even remember his dream. This was elaborated by Tosafot and Rosh in their interpretations of the Joseph and Daniel narratives.¹⁴ Once the narratives were understood to be similar, even fanciful connections were made, such as finding the numerical value of Daniel hidden in the Joseph story.¹⁵

One parallel not noted in the commentaries is the opening verse of Genesis 41, *After two years' time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile*. The reference is to two years since the cupbearer was released from prison at the end of Genesis 40. It would seem that the intent of Daniel 2:1 is to draw a parallel to the Joseph narrative in Genesis at the very beginning of the dream episode; the events took place "after two years."¹⁶ What the exact event was, that took place two years earlier, is functionally irrelevant, for the purpose of the parallel to the Joseph narrative all that is needed is that the Daniel episode begins with a phrase along the lines of "two years later..."

Daniel 2:1 uses the phrase *In the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar* to begin its dream narrative in the same way the Joseph narrative does. It is intended foremost as a literary device, and this determined its usage in Daniel. Once this terminology was chosen and the parallel was established, the rabbis found ways to make it meaningful from a historical perspective as well, though historical concerns were not the driving force behind the author of this passage.

NOTES

1. There is an additional chronological difficulty when comparing Jeremiah 25:1 to Daniel 1:1. According to Jeremiah 25:1, *the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah...was the first year of King Nebuchadrezzar of Bablylon*. However, King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem in the third year of King Jehoiakim according to Daniel 1:1, which according to Jeremiah was before Nebuchadnezzar began ruling. Daniel 1:1 must therefore take place during Nebuchadnezzar's accession year, the period from his accession until the first New Year. The first full year of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign was the fourth year of King Jehoakim. Jan-Win Wesseliuss, "The Writing of Daniel", p. 294, note 8, in John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint, eds., *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception – Volume 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).
2. Louis Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1978) pp. 137-138; See also Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins & Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) p. 55.
3. Leon Wood, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) pp. 49-50.
4. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel – The New American Commentary* (Paris, ON: B & H Publishing, 1994) p. 76.
5. S.R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge Bible Series), (Cambridge: University Press, 1922) p. 17.
6. Carl Beckwith, ed., *Ezekiel, Daniel – Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012) p. 252.
7. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, editors, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 995.

8. See Matthias Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: The Ancient Near Eastern Origins & Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) p. 54.
9. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, editor, *Seder Olam* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998) chapter 27, p. 237.
10. Joseph Alobaidi, ed., *The Book of Daniel: The Commentary of R. Saadia Gaon* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006) p.433. He states that "the Bible registers years according to Babylon, but also according to Jerusalem."
11. *Antiquities* 10.10.3.
12. E.H. Lindo, trans., *The Conciliator* (Brooklyn, New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 2000) p. 326.
13. See Shemuel Ha-Kohen and Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra - Daniel* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994) pp. 19-20, 56; Louis Hartman and Alexander DiLella, *The Anchor Bible – The Book of Daniel* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) pp. 55-56.
14. *Hadar Zekenim* (Jerusalem: Makhon le-Hafatzat Perushei Ba'alei ha-Tosafot al ha-Torah) pp. 100-103. See also *Pa'aneah Raza* (Israel: Makhon Torat ha-Rishonim, 1998) p. 180, Gen. 41:8.
15. Rabbenu Yoel, *Sefer ha-Remazim* (New York: Julius Klugmann and Sons, 2001) p. 139, Gen. 41:39.
16. This idea appears in Choon Leong Seow, *Daniel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) p. 38, but there the chronology is confused, and the events are understood to take place in "the second year of Joseph's sojourn in Egypt" and "during Daniel's second year in exile."



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