

What Does History Record about Nebuchadnezzar's Insanity?

Daniel 4:19-27; Isaiah 55:6-7

November 13, 2022

Greg L. Price

When we began considering Daniel 4 a few weeks ago, I promised that in a future sermon we would consider some writings of ancient historians as it relates to the divinely induced insanity of Nebuchadnezzar. Today I plan to bring that testimony to you in the hope that your faith in the veracity of the Scriptures might be further confirmed and strengthened. Historical writings do not establish the credibility of Scripture—that is the work of the Holy Spirit through the inspiration of Scripture. Our faith rests not in historical or archaeological testimony, but in the sovereign work of God in supernaturally giving to His prophets and apostles the exact words to be revealed in Scripture (2 Peter 1:21).

Thus, before considering our text today in Daniel 4, I would like to take a few minutes to present some testimony from the writings of ancient historians that relate to Nebuchadnezzar's insanity.

Skeptics have in the past and in the present attacked the credibility of the Book of Daniel as a whole; and Daniel 4 is no exception. Daniel 4 details the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, its divine interpretation by Daniel, and its full realization in the insanity that God brought on Nebuchadnezzar in behaving like an ox of the field. Three main attacks are aimed by critics at Nebuchadnezzar's insanity.

1. There is no historical record outside of the Bible that allows for seven years in which Nebuchadnezzar was absent from the throne.

One Old Testament scholar, Paul Ferguson, has noted, "Meticulous historical records are available up to about the eleventh year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, after which the chronicles are practically silent" JETS 37:3 (September 1994), p. 322. Nebuchadnezzar reigned for about 43 years, and very little, in fact, is known about the close of his reign. It would seem that to draw from such a silence in Nebuchadnezzar's reign that there was no seven-year absence from the throne is unwarranted—mere silence does not prove it didn't happen.

2. A seven-year absence of Nebuchadnezzar from the throne due to insanity would surely have led to his assassination and usurpation by his son or another prince in the kingdom of Babylon.

In the ancient world, insanity actually protected one (and especially a king) from being murdered because such an insane person was believed to be possessed by a god or higher being. His ravings and strange behavior were treated as some form of communication with the gods. There is a Babylonian tradition that represents Nebuchadnezzar as having been possessed by a god which led to very strange behavior (as we shall see). Did Achish preserve David for the same reason (1 Samuel 21:13)?

3. No historical record (outside the Bible) reports Nebuchadnezzar's insanity as would be expected if he actually suffered such a fate.

To the contrary, public records in ancient history did not usually portray a king's weaknesses, faults, defeats, and downfalls, but rather were a glowing report of his conquests and achievements (the Bible is quite different—it does not hide sins). Thus, it would not be surprising to find no ancient, detailed report of Nebuchadnezzar's insanity. The fact that little or no historical evidence exists does not mean a certain event never occurred. Consider how the following ancient reports could very well give a version (though distorted) of this event in ancient history.

An ancient Babylonian tablet was published in 1975 by A. K. Grayson in which Nebuchadnezzar is the subject

of a fragment in this tablet. In this tablet, Nebuchadnezzar has become very disoriented. His decrees are contradictory, and he does not even respond to his own name. He shows no concern for his son or daughter and does not even care for the worship centers to his god, Marduk. His life is of no value to him— JETS 37:3 (September 1994), pp. 322-323. Though this ancient tablet does not declare that Nebuchadnezzar was made insane by God for seven years (as revealed in Scripture—we would not expect that), the bazaar behavior of Nebuchadnezzar could very well be a euphemistic (polite) way of explaining his insanity by a chronicler.

The ancient church historian, Eusebius (ca. 260-339), had access to a history of the Chaldeans and Assyrians written by Abydenus (an ancient Greek historian, ca. 200 B.C.) in which Abydenus relates an account concerning Nebuchadnezzar that after he had achieved all his conquests that he went up into his palace was possessed by some god (the ancient view of insanity) and uttered some event of calamity to befall Babylon (Daniel 4:28-31). There existed a historical tradition about some extraordinary event toward the end of Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

Berossus was a Babylonian priest of Marduk (chief god of Babylon), and he wrote a history of Babylon (ca. 290-278 B.C.) in which he describes Nebuchadnezzar falling particularly ill at the end of his reign. The Greek text in which Berossus wrote gives the idea that “the king was suddenly invaded by sickness” (E.J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 358). Dr. Young explains, “Now sickness before death is so common that there would be no point in mentioning it, were it not of an unusual kind” (E.J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 358). This is not direct confirmation of the biblical account, but again, it relates a tradition that something very unusual occurred toward the end of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. History is hardly silent about some extraordinary (even supernatural) calamity that befell Nebuchadnezzar at the end of his reign. Even skeptics of the biblical account are willing to acknowledge such a historical tradition existed.

The main points from our text are: (1) Daniel Is Greatly Troubled (Daniel 4:19); (2) Daniel’s Divine Interpretation of the Dream (Daniel 4:20-26); (3) Daniel’s Plea for the King’s Repentance (Daniel 4:27).

I. Daniel Is Greatly Troubled (Daniel 4:19).

A. When God gave to Daniel the interpretation of the king’s dream, it stunned Daniel so much that he was completely silent for some time (“one hour” is an idiom for a period of time) in the presence of the king (no doubt it was Daniel 4:13-14 that so greatly disturbed Daniel). The length of Daniel’s silence was so conspicuous that Nebuchadnezzar eventually breaks the silence and encourages Daniel to declare the interpretation to him even if it greatly disturbs Daniel.

B. The latter part of the verse has the idea that the king’s enemies would rejoice to hear the dream and its interpretation because its fulfillment would bring severe judgment upon Nebuchadnezzar.

1. Regardless of the bad news that the dream had for the king, God’s revelation must be faithfully received and declared. The same is true of our reading of God’s revelation. We must receive it as faithful and true and not change it to suit the fancies and sensibilities of our modern culture (e.g. acceptance of sexual perversion/pornography).

2. A message of judgment is not easy, but it is necessary, if we would be faithful like the prophets. It was the false prophets of old that toned down God’s judgment and distorted God’s revelation. Just as we cannot distort God’s mercy, so we cannot distort God’s justice. When God’s justice is sugar-coated, it cancels God’s mercy (for God is merciful and gracious because we deserve His righteous judgment).

II. Daniel’s Divine Interpretation of the Dream (Daniel 4:20-26).

A. Daniel proceeds to retell the details of the dream (Daniel 4:20-21) in nearly the same words

given by the king (Daniel 4:10-12). This part of the dream describes the great glory and worldwide power of the king. And then Daniel comes to who the tree represents (Daniel 4:22).

B. Now Daniel comes to the most difficult part of interpreting the dream (Daniel 4:24-26): the judgment that God would bring upon Nebuchadnezzar through His angelic watchers for his idolatrous pride in robbing God of His glory and oppressing his people, stepping upon them, crushing them in order to achieve his own glory. Dear ones, God doesn't just dislike our pride. He hates it. It is an abomination to Him (Proverbs 6:16—the first of seven abominations is a "proud look").

1. Though the decree to cut Nebuchadnezzar down to size was issued by the angelic watchers (Daniel 4:13-14), they were but the servants of the Most High God (Daniel 4:24).

2. Who are the "they" in Daniel 4:25-26? They are the angelic watchers who would bring to pass the will of God (Daniel 4:17). Again, note how involved are God's angelic watchers in this world (both in judgment and in preservation—Daniel 6:19-22).

3. Daniel clearly states that this judgment will befall the king due to his robbing God of His glory who raises and puts down all rulers (Daniel 4:25,26). How we could wish that God would display the same truth to our rulers who do nothing but boast about their accomplishments. But if we would wish that for our rulers, must we not take even greater care that we learn the same truth about ourselves? It's easy to pray that others would see their pride, but do we see our pride? Our criticism of others ("constructive criticism") is unprofitable, because it does not truly care to help others or to serve others in love, but rather to put others down and exalts ourselves (that we are not like them—we are better than they).

4. However, the angelic watchers leave open a door of hope and mercy to Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:26). This judgment will not be permanent, but temporary (seven times—seven years). If only unbelievers would understand that God's delay in sending the full force of God's judgment is not to show His approval of their rebellion, but to lead them to repentance (Romans 2:4).

III. Daniel's Plea for the King's Repentance (Daniel 4:27).

A. The dream has been interpreted, but Daniel is not finished. He concludes by giving to the king the only way that the tranquility and peace of his reign might be extended: the way of repentance. Instead of continuing in proud rebellion against God, he must humble himself before God and practice righteousness in obedience to the Lord and must show mercy to the oppressed who were trampled upon for his own glory.

B. True repentance begins with faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. Faith is the mother grace that gives birth to repentance, love, and new obedience (Hebrews 11:6).

1. Our repentance and all our works are dead before God apart from faith in Christ. But where there is saving faith (KAT), there will always be gospel repentance (not only once, but throughout our life until we are glorified).

2. Repentance is a sorrowful change of mind about our sin that leads to a change in behavior. Without a change of behavior, there is no evidence that the heart has been changed. There is no true joy in God's forgiveness apart from sorrow over our sin in having offended a holy and merciful God.

3. God even grants to the wicked a merciful reprieve from temporal judgment at times (Nineveh—Jonah 3:10; Jeremiah 18:7-8—that should lead to repentance, but sadly it usually doesn't, as it didn't with Nebuchadnezzar). Is God's mercy leading us to repentance?

4. If God is merciful to the wicked, how much more will He delight to show His mercy to those and deliver from eternal judgment (not just temporal judgment) those who trust in Jesus and repent of their evil ways (Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33; Isaiah 55:6-7)?