

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part III

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The book of Daniel contains a great deal of emphasis upon the concept of mystery or secrets. To understand the significance mystery in Daniel, it is good to learn about the context in which God reveals mysteries to Daniel. Daniel is the first book in the Hebrew canon that provides wisdom for how a devout Jew should live outside the land. The previous books relate to living in the land. Daniel is unique among the prophets in that it is a mixture of wisdom stories and prophecy.

DANIEL AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

In the ancient world at that time it was believed that if a one nation defeated and enslaved another nation then the victorious nation's god was greater than the god of the defeated nation. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar learned the hard way that the God of the Hebrews was not just a regional god, instead, He is the God over the whole world. "I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and *among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'" (Dan. 4:34–35). The book of Daniel is a demonstration of God's sovereignty and a revelation of His plan for history by revealing secrets or mysteries about the future.

The prophetic portions in Daniel are chapters 2, 7, 8—12, although there are prophetic implications in some of the others. Chapters 2 through 7 are written in Aramaic, while the rest of the book is in Hebrew. Therefore the Aramaic term *raz* simply means "mystery," "secret," or "something hidden."¹ Stephen Miller notes that it "basically means 'something that is unknown.' In this context the 'mystery' was the contents and interpretation of the king's dream."² This word is used nine times in the book of Daniel (2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47 2X; 4:9). Other than in 4:9, all the uses in chapter 2 refer to the mystery of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its revelation.

THE REVEALER OF MYSTERIES

Job in his reply to Zophar says, "He reveals mysteries from the darkness, and brings the deep darkness into light" (Job 12:22). Enlightening the situation is exactly what God used Daniel to accomplish in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Nebuchadnezzar was tormented by a repetitive dream that he had every night, which he could not make sense of (Dan. 2:1–6). So he called in his Pagan advisor and not only ordered them to interpret his dream, but to tell him the dream itself (Dan. 2:2). His advisor wanted the King to tell them the dream and then they said they would analyze it. Nebuchadnezzar evidently knew if he told them the dream then his advisors could make up just about anything and declare it to be the proper interpretation of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar believed that a god was the source of his dream and thought if a god could give him the dream then He could give it to his advisors as well. His advisor thought differently: "The Chaldeans answered the king and said, 'There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has *ever* asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and there is no one else who could declare it to the king

except gods, whose dwelling place is not with *mortal flesh*” (Dan. 2:10–11). Nebuchadnezzar did not like their response and threw a temper tantrum. “Because of this the king became indignant and very furious, and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:12).

Little did they know that these events were a great setup for Daniel, but more importantly for Daniel’s God. The sequence of events and the dialogue in Daniel 2 make it clear that Nebuchadnezzar’s dream could not be known through mere human ingenuity, it would require God, who knows the inner or secret thoughts of a person to make that known. (This is what Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, where he notes the only way to know God’s thoughts is through revelation.) When Daniel was given the opportunity to deal with Nebuchadnezzar’s dream asked for some time to consult God. “Then Daniel went to his house and informed his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, about the matter, in order that they might request compassion from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his friends might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon” (Dan. 2:16–17). The fact that Daniel and his three friends needed time to consult with God demonstrates that the Hebrew boys were normal humans who were just like Nebuchadnezzar’s other advisors; the difference between them was their God. The God of the Hebrews really could know a person’s thoughts and was capable of revealing them to mankind. So this is what the God of Daniel did! “Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision” (Dan. 2:19a). Daniel properly responds by giving God the credit, glory, and praise (Dan. 2:19b–23).

This event with Nebuchadnezzar demonstrates at least three things: 1) Israel was not conquered because the pagan god of Babylon was stronger than the God of Israel. In fact, the rest of the book of Daniel demonstrates that the God of Israel is the only true God and He rules over the affairs of man, even allowing someone like Nebuchadnezzar to come to power, not to fulfill his own purposes, but as an instrument in God’s hand to fulfill the Lord’s purposes. 2) The God of Israel is able to reveal the hidden destinies or secrets of the future. This is why the Lord sent one of His representatives—Daniel—to demonstrate that “there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days” (Dan. 2:28). 3) Even though Gentiles may receive input from the God of heaven, which was the case in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, they cannot understand it without the input of God’s Word as mediated through His priestly nation Israel. This is illustrated in the next chapter (Dan. 3) as Nebuchadnezzar creates an idol based upon a corrupted interpretation and application of his dream from God.

THE MYSTERY REVEALED

It turns out that Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is an overview of the future history of the times of the Gentiles: the course of Gentile domination and its eventual destiny. Daniel first states the content of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, as demanded by the king. Next he interprets the meaning and significance of the dream with the outcome resulting in the fact that mysteries about the future were revealed.

The dream was about a large statue with a head “of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay” (Dan. 2:32–33). Here we see a description of the statue representing the different phases of the kingdom of man. As Nebuchadnezzar kept looking some action in relation to the statue began to occur. “You continued looking until a stone was cut out without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay, and crushed them” (Dan. 2:34). Finally, the result of this action is described: “Then the iron, the clay,

the bronze, the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:35).

After stating Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel next begins explaining its meaning to the pagan king. "This *was* the dream; now we shall tell its interpretation before the king" (Dan. 2:36). Daniel emphasizes the fact that Nebuchadnezzar is "the king of kings," meaning that he can build an empire made up of multiple other kingdoms because God has decreed this. However, the Lord makes it very clear that the only reason he is given the authority to build this empire is because God has given him permission to do so.

Next, Daniel begins to explain the metals from the statue and says, "You are the head of gold" (Dan. 2:38). Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire refer to the first phase of the kingdom of man as the head of gold. Daniel continues: "And after you there will arise another kingdom inferior to you, then another third kingdom of bronze, which will rule over all the earth. Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; inasmuch as iron crushes and shatters all things, so, like iron that breaks in pieces, it will crush and break all these in pieces" (Dan. 2:39–40). These verses note the successive empires of Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Medo-Persia is clearly identified in Daniel 8:20 and Greece in Daniel 8:21. Rome is clearly identified as the Empire in power when the Book of Revelation is written in the first century A.D.

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford, 1907), p. 1112. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, electronic version (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 2000), p. 1981.

² Stephen R. Miller, *The New American Commentary: Daniel*, vol. 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), p. 84.

³ The "times of the Gentiles" began in 586 B.C. and ends in the future at the second coming of Christ (Luke 21:24). It refers to the time when great Gentile empires will dominate history, which is contrasted with the time when Israel will dominate the world, as in the past in the days of David and Solomon, and will again in the future when Christ rules during the millennium.