

## Daniel 6

The story of Daniel is set during the period of Persian rule, after the Judeans had been exiled to Babylon, and then Persia had defeated Babylon. Although some Judeans did return to Judea, many of them remained scattered throughout foreign lands. Even those who were in Judea were ruled by Persia (and later other empires), so the story accepts the reality of foreign domination, which had been unthinkable before the Exile. There was no way God would allow Jerusalem and the Temple to fall into the hands of those who followed a foreign god. And then God did allow it. This story brings to mind again Jeremiah's pre-exile instructions to the people, to build houses in the new place they're taken to, and raise their children there, and be a blessing to that new place. That is what Daniel has done; that's what he's modeling. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" the first generation of exiles had asked. This is how, or at least, it's how to continue being God's people when the land, the temple, and the king that made you winners have all been stripped away.

The story is written for Jews, but interestingly, we are never privy to Daniel's inner thoughts. The narrator stands outside the action and describes it for us, including things that Daniel never sees or hears, and in fact the only mind's innards we get a glimpse of is that of the king. This, I think, positions the audience to imagine that this is what it's like for the *Persians* to watch a Jew being a Jew in their land. The story's written for Jews to tell them what it's like to be Persian, so as to help them be Jews in diaspora. And by the way, it *is* fiction; it's probably written under the rule of the Seleucids but set in an earlier period, and there was no King Darius of Mede.

So King Darius appears to be a little bit of a poser. He loves being king, but he doesn't

love the actual work of ruling, so he sets up 120 satraps, who report to three presidents, and those presidents report to Daniel because Daniel is just that competent and hard-working and indispensable. He's following Jeremiah's advice, right, and being a blessing to the land in which he finds himself. But the presidents and satraps are jealous, and since they can't find any real grounds for bringing him down, they conspire to invent some.

This is their good idea: "Oh King Darius, live forever! Everybody thinks you should make a rule that for 30 days everybody can pray only to you, not to any other gods, and if they break that rule they'll be thrown to the lions. The way you should make the rule is, you should have it written and then you sign it, and that way nobody, not even you, can revoke the rule." This is a truly preposterous idea and not a thing that kings actually did. The fact that the king falls for it and signs on the dotted line tells you what an un-self-aware egoist he is. That's who Daniel's working for—and you start to appreciate that Daniel's job is really, really hard.

Meanwhile Daniel keeps on being a good Jew, goes home and prays to God three times a day, and does it visibly, through his windows. The satraps et al. barge into his house, run upstairs, snap a picture of him praying, and run it back to the king, snapping shut the trap: "Daniel pays no attention to you, O king, and he's saying his prayers three times a day." No backsies, the king has to follow through on this 30-day rule he signed, and Daniel is thrown into the lions' den.

We don't hear Word One about what it's like for Daniel in the lions' den, or how he feels, or what he says to God. But we do hear that King Darius is a nervous wreck. He can't eat, he can't sleep. And at dawn he rushes to the pit of lions to check on Daniel. Again, how does this story play to a Jew who's living under Empire? It emphasizes the weakness of the king, his

essential dependence for well-being on the Jewish foreigner in his land. Daniel's cool as a cucumber, and his first words to the king are reassuringly loyal: "O king, live forever!" The king is the one who suffered all night, not Daniel, and his suffering was caused by his own laziness and ego. Salvation was enacted by Daniel's God, whom the king refers to, when he makes a public proclamation, as "the living God," whose "dominion has no end." The whole episode has been a conversion experience for King Darius—converted from seeing himself as the locus of power to seeing "the living God" as the locus of power and salvation. We recoil from Darius' punishment of the satraps by throwing them and their families into the pit, but I think the ancient audience would have received that as a happy ending. I'm not endorsing it, I'm just acknowledging those characters.

So if this is a story for Jews in diaspora about how their hosts (captors?) see them and what the Jews' role is to be in that environment, what has the audience learned? It's learned that despite the trappings of power, the king puts on his robe one sleeve at a time like anybody else, and that he has no unforeseen resources or secret weapons that they need to fear. His army happened to beat the other army, that's all. He's just a guy, and the satraps etc. are the usual conniving scoundrels who are attracted to power, and they're definitely dangerous, but they're not any kind of cosmic threat. The audience has also learned that even a superpower with an awesome army *needs* the contributions of people like them—that just as Daniel was needed for competent administration of the kingdom, so each of them can and should contribute to the well-being of the city in which they live. There's a little transcending of national or ethnic boundaries in that message—we're all just human beings, trying to raise our families and make the world a better place. And then finally, the audience learns from King

Darius' closing words that Isaiah's prophecy remains a living thing: that nations *will* stream to the mountain of the Lord and proclaim his glory. Darius does not acknowledge Daniel's God because he's been conquered by a Judean army; quite the contrary. Darius acknowledges Daniel's God because violence has *not* been done. This nation has streamed to the mountain of the Lord because of the kindness and mercy of the Lord, which has preserved Daniel's life and thus allowed Darius to continue benefiting from Daniel's services. Darius wasn't conquered, he was converted. He moved from an illusion of power to a realization that God has the power.

If there's an Advent message here, it's this: weeping endureth for the night, but joy cometh in the morning. When you're a king who's made some really poor decisions, or if you're living under a king who makes poor decisions, it's a long, agonizing night as you wait to see what's become of those decisions. Sometimes we can't eat or sleep, so appalled and distressed are we at the actions that have been taken, and round about 3 AM, sweaty and ashen, we feel like morning will never come. But morning came for Darius, and Christ will come again for us, so that our poor decisions or the atrocities enacted around us shrink into insignificance as we see that God was there the whole time—gracious, faithful, redemptive.

Let us pray:

God of deliverance,  
You rescued Daniel from the mouths of the lions when he was punished for flourishing in a strange land. Liberate all who are endangered for being themselves, and rescue us from anything that separates us from worshiping you and recognizing our kinship with all people. Take us through the dark nights into your glorious new day. Amen.