

# **SOUTH ASIA BIBLE COMMENTARY**

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When word gets out that the king is considering promoting Daniel, jealousy creeps in among the ranks of administrators, and they begin looking for faults or *corruption* that could bring Daniel down (6:4). But Daniel has been neither dishonest nor negligent, and even a careful search brings up nothing. Everyone knew Daniel's religious convictions and that he would risk his life rather than be disloyal to *the law of his God* (6:5). The conspirators knew that this was the one area where Daniel could be trapped, for religion and state matters were not separate in Persia.

Together, they approach the king with what seems to them to be a perfect plan (6:6-7). They tell the king that *all* the officials have *agreed* that he should issue a *decree* making it mandatory for everyone to pray only to the king for the next thirty days. Appeals to other deities or humans should be punished by death. This proposal is odd because Persians did not regard their kings as divine. Accordingly, this decree may be similar to Nebuchadnezzar's command to show loyalty to him by bowing down to the image he had set up (see comment on 3:1-2). The advisors are proposing that the king be the only mediator and representative of the people to his gods.

This proposal must have appealed to the king's vanity and to his desire to test the loyalty of his new subjects. To ensure that the king's favour of Daniel does not undo their scheme, the administrators urge him to put the decree *in writing* so that it becomes irrevocable (6:8-9; see Esth 1:19). Daniel must now make a choice between two conflicting laws and demands for his loyalty: the law of the Lord, which forbids praying to any being but him, and the law of the Medes and the Persians.

When Daniel hears about the new law, he simply goes home and prays to the Lord as usual (6:10). The narrative conveys a sense of calm determination. Daniel expresses no anxiety, nor does he question the Lord or cry out against those who have plotted against him. Nor is his prayer an act of outright defiance. He simply gives thanks to his God and asks for help as he does every day. For him nothing has changed. He was young when he was captured, and now he is old. He has seen kings come and go and has repeatedly experienced that God is in control. So he is unshaken.

Daniel prays *three times a day on his knees* in his private upper room, facing *towards Jerusalem*. His choice of direction was probably motivated by Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8:22-52). Solomon had specifically asked the Lord that if his people went into exile and they repented and prayed towards the Jerusalem temple, God would hear their prayers and "uphold their cause" (1 Kgs 8:46-49). His praying three times is also voluntary, for God's law does not specify exactly how often one should pray. He is probably being portrayed as an example of disciplined and perhaps ceaseless prayer (Ps 55:17).

While Daniel is not openly rebelling, neither is he hiding in fear. So the plotters soon see what they hoped for – *Daniel praying* to his God when the law requires him to pray only to the king (6:11). They hurry to the king and remind him of his *decree* and of the punishment for disobedience, probably because they know that he favours Daniel (6:12). The king acknowledges that the law stands and cannot be revoked. The plotters then drop the news that Daniel has broken the law. They emphasise Daniel's foreign origin, perhaps subtly implying that he is not one of them and so his loyalty can never be trusted (6:13). They claim that Daniel has deliberately disrespected the king and defiantly prays *three times a day*.

#### 6:14-23 A night in the pit

The king is *distressed*, perhaps because he realises he has let himself be deceived or because he fears losing an able and experienced administrator. He tries to save Daniel, probably searching for loopholes in the law or other ways to override the decree, but he fails (6:14). As if to show that the officials cut his efforts short, they cut in and remind him of the finality of the law, and presumably that it requires execution that day by sundown (6:15).

Another layer of irony is unveiled – the king through whom all prayers are to be answered is unable even to do what he himself desires. He has to give the orders for Daniel's execution, and Daniel is thrown into a pit filled with *lions* (6:16). Before the entrance is sealed, Darius expresses his hope that Daniel's God will succeed where he has failed.

A *stone* is placed over the pit and sealed to prevent anyone from accessing the pit (6:17; see also Matt 27:66). Ropes or chains would have been tied across the rock with a patch of wet clay placed on top of them, on which the king's signet ring was pressed before the clay hardened, leaving an impression in the clay. The stone could not be moved without breaking the seal.

The anxious king spends a sleepless and miserable night, then casts off his majesty and hurries out at dawn to see whether Daniel has survived (6:18-20). His *anguished voice* reveals his state of mind, and his referring to Daniel as the *servant of the living God* reveals the king's knowledge of the Lord.

Again, God reveals his sovereign power to an emperor. Daniel replies with a greeting, and explains how God accomplished this miracle and through it vindicated his faithful and *innocent* servant (6:21-22).

It is possible that Daniel's ordeal in the lion's den was in the nature of a trial rather than an execution. In many ancient West Asian legal systems, someone accused of a crime was tortured or thrown into a river in the belief that if the gods judged them to be innocent, the gods would enable them to survive. The king is probably *overjoyed* both



because Daniel's God judged him innocent and because he rescued him (6:23).

Like the story of the three Jews who trusted God and were rescued from the furnace (3:26-27), news of Daniel's emerging unscathed after a night with hungry lions must have spread throughout the Medo-Persian Empire. This was probably God's purpose for saving Daniel not from the trial in the lions' den but through a long night with them!

#### 6:24-28 Honour for Daniel's God

The king commands that the officials who accused Daniel and their families face the same trial that Daniel did (6:24). Executing the family of a guilty person seems unreasonable and cruel to us but was a common practice in the region, perhaps to encourage second thoughts before acting and to prevent retaliation (see also Num 16:27-33; Josh 7:24-25). The fact that the lions instantly kill these people is further evidence that Daniel's survival was miraculous. We also see more irony, for the very trap the officials set for Daniel captures them (see Pss 7:15; 57:6).

Like Nebuchadnezzar (3:29; 4:3, 34-35), Darius decrees that everyone in the empire must honour Daniel's God (6:25-27). The king's description of God is also similar to Nebuchadnezzar's, but Darius adds *for he is the living God who rescues and saves*. Thus, the irrevocable decree aimed at harming God's servant is followed by a decree that declares God's power and sovereignty over all people. Rather than being destroyed by human enemies, God's faithful servant and witness continues to prosper in the Medo-Persian court.

The reference to Darius and Cyrus in 6:28 raises a similar problem to that identified in 5:30-31, and similar solutions apply. The NIV footnote suggests that the verse can also be translated as meaning that the ruler was Darius who was also called Cyrus (6:28; see comments on 5:30-31).

This story shows God's sovereignty, but it also shows how a mature believer faced persecution. In South Asia, Christians are a minority, and often government actions can cause us to fear and despair. They may also evoke anger and a desire to retaliate. When faced with a law that conflicted with the law of God, Daniel neither gave in out of fear of death nor made a public display of resistance. Whenever Christians have taken up arms citing religious reasons, as, for example, in the Crusades in the Middle Ages, the resulting historical legacy is not one that glorifies God.

As Daniel shows, the right thing to do is simply to carry on with right practices in quiet faithfulness and prepare ourselves for persecution by maintaining a close relationship with God. Jesus warned that experiencing persecution is part of following him, and his way is not armed resistance or public protests but submission to God and a readiness to die, taking non-violence to its extreme logical end (Matt

5:10-12; 10:38-39; Luke 6:27-30; John 15:18-21). While Daniel suffered but lived, our Lord died a terrible death, as did many Christians who were thrown to the lions in the Roman amphitheatres in the first three centuries of Christianity, and as many do today. Deliverance may or may not come in this life.

We have the advantage over Daniel in that we know the Messiah has come and conquered death for us (1 Cor 15:54-55).

#### 7:1-12:13 Part 2: Dreams and Visions

Chapter 7 marks the beginning of the apocalyptic section of the book of Daniel. These dreams and visions that the prophet saw in exile were designed to bring hope to the people of God and help them to trust in God's power, sovereignty and faithfulness.

At the time Daniel was written, Israel had lost its national independence. Even though the Jews were allowed to return home after exile, they were still under foreign rule, and the future of their nation seemed uncertain. Many wondered what had happened to the everlasting dynasty that God had promised David (2 Sam 7:16). In this situation, assurance of the coming Messiah and the establishment of his eternal kingdom inspired hope.

#### 7:1-28 The Dream of Four Beasts

As in previous chapters, God gives a prophetic dream, but now Daniel is the recipient. This time, the interpretation of the dream is given within the dream itself. The interpretation states that the four beasts represent four kings or kingdoms (7:17), and thus many interpret the beasts as corresponding to the four parts of the statue Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream (see 7:17; comments on 2:36-45).

#### 7:1-6 The first three beasts

The account that Daniel himself recorded is dated to the beginning of Belshazzar's reign or co-regency with his father, Nabonidus, in about 550 BC (7:1; see comment on 5:1). Daniel sees an astounding vision of *the great sea* being stirred up by *the four winds* (7:2). These winds signify the four compass directions and suggest havoc or turmoil everywhere. The Israelites were never a seafaring people, and to them the sea was a symbol of chaos and danger (Gen 1:2; Job 7:12; Jonah 2:2-4; Rev 13:1). So a tumultuous sea would have aroused a sense of danger and an anticipation of evil.

Sure enough, out of this chaos emerge *four* ferocious *beasts*, probably in succession (7:3). Except for the second, these are not regular animals but hybrids. Animal images are used throughout the OT to represent God (Hos 13:7-8), nations (Jer 5:6; 49:19-22) and individuals (Gen 49:9), though none are as bizarre as these.

The first resembles a lion, stands upright and has wings like an eagle. As with the statue of Nebuchadnezzar and the Medo-Persian Empire, the four beasts are symbols of the empire's power, being raised from a human mind descended from thinking he was

The second beast is like a bear, whether it is raised or not. It is a physical abnormality, a symbol of the empire's power, moving forward. Most think of the Medo-Persian Empire, which took three ribs symbolise rulers or three king in great battles: the purpose of the empire was to make a theological statement against the powers of this world. This bear is perhaps symbolising the empire's power against Babylon, which would stretch into Europe. The Persian Empire was any other before it.

The third beast is like a leopard, headed leopard (7:6). God gives it *authority* to conquer the Great and expand speed and expand the kingdom. The king's death, the kingdom signified by the fourth beast.

Regardless of whether the four beasts are all acted upon or not, they are more than acting on the King of the earth.

#### 7:7-12 The fourth beast

The fourth beast is not described as to its mystery, as the first three. Unlike its predecessors, it is a new, terrifying, reminiscent of the dream (2:40). These are symbols of the empire's power (75:4-5; 89:17).

As Daniel predicted, the fourth beast replaces three like eyes and a

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## LIVING WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

A wide range of religions and cultures has characterised human life since time immemorial. However, the phenomenon of plurality is perhaps most noticeable in South Asia with its rich and confusing mosaic of racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and social diversity. All of us who live here have to deal with this plurality as part of our everyday lives. For example, when our neighbours are celebrating a festival associated with their faith and offer us some special food associated with the festival, may we eat it? When the village celebrates a harvest festival, should we join in, or wait until the date of the harvest festival in the official church calendar, which may bear no relation to the harvest date in our region? These examples present us with the simple question: How do we go about living alongside people of other faiths?

Let us start by laying out the fundamental principles. Christians are called to live harmoniously alongside people of other faiths while maintaining a conscious witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and demonstrating the love of God in practice. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. Our ultimate purpose must be to contribute to the establishment of God's kingdom by providing an opportunity for all to believe and be saved by God's grace for eternal life. In this sense, we must be like Paul, who saw his task as "the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:16).

In multifaith contexts like South Asia, we will often have to answer questions related to our belief and practice. We must be able to answer such questions humbly but confidently (1 Pet 3:15). For example, when we are asked why we are not performing rituals in order to earn salvation we must humbly explain that salvation is God's gracious gift. If we are asked questions about our hope of Christ's return, we should be able to testify to what we believe, and why. If we are asked why we go to church, we must explain that the church is the distinctive global and local community of believers who submit to God and do good to others. As we do this, we must uphold the Bible as the complete code of life, Christ as

the cosmic Lord and Saviour, and the finality of his name and the salvation which he brings to all human beings.

It is not always easy to talk about our faith, particularly in situations where Christians face social and religious restrictions. But what we can always do is work to serve our neighbours. Our warrant for doing this goes all the way back to God's call to Abraham to go and live in a foreign land among people of other faiths and become a blessing to them (Gen 12:1-3). Our Lord too summarised the teaching of the Old and New Testaments as "love your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

When Christians live with integrity among others, they win their respect for their work ethic and biblical morality (1 Thess 4:12). Christians' commitment to showing divine love, care and grace as God's people constitutes a living testimony to God's love. It can prompt people to think and draw them to a different morality and spirituality of peace and righteousness. When this happens, Christians are functioning as salt and light in the world, preserving and guiding their communities just as our Lord commanded (Matt 5:13-14).

We should also seek to identify common issues such as poverty, development and the environment on which we can work together with those of other faiths. By working for coexistence, we will also be working towards bringing in the universal peace and goodwill among people of all nations on earth that the angelic hosts sang about at the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ more than two thousand years ago.

However, as we build friendships with those of other faiths, we will increasingly find ourselves facing the challenges outlined in the opening paragraph. Our individual responses to their invitations may vary, and may vary from situation to situation (see Paul's discussion of eating food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14). As a general rule, we may say that there is no harm in getting involved in cultural practices and customs as long as such involvement does not compromise our faith in Christ. But we may have to pray long and hard for discernment in order to be able to distinguish between what is cultural and what is religious in the areas of tradition, custom and practice.

Pervaiz Sultan

So Daniel approaches the guard appointed to supervise the four Judahites and proposes a ten-day experiment with a vegetarian diet (1:11-12). This period would be long enough to see any physical difference between the four of them and those on the royal fare, but not long enough to get the officials in trouble (1:13). The guard accepts the suggestion (1:14). When he examines them ten days later, he sees that Daniel and his friends look better and healthier than those enjoying a far richer diet. Convinced by the

results, the guard gives them a vegetarian diet for the rest of their training (1:15-16).

### 1:17-21 God gives wisdom

God gives the four young men *knowledge and understanding*, which means wisdom in all aspects of life. He especially gives Daniel the ability to *understand visions and dreams* (1:17). This ability was highly prized in Babylonia during that time, and so this detail allows the reader to anticipate how God will use this gift in the rest of Daniel's life.