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The Mysterious in the Book of Daniel: An Updated Understanding of an Ancient Visionary

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Abstract

The biblical Book of Daniel (twelve chapters) is largely written in Kurdish Aramaic. One wonders why. This study offers a partial comparison of Chapters Seven and Eight; it omits the latter half of each chapter, the chronicling of the Succession of Kings. Both chapters focus on some issues in the account of ancient visions of the Creation: the creation of human beings and the creation of the Temple site in Urshalīm al-Kuds. The source of this tradition is not dealt with. Both chapters are indicative of the traditions and beliefs governing the period of the building of the First Temple in the life of the King of Kings Suleimān (pen-name: Shlomo) and up to the time of the conquest of Judah (Judea) by the Chaldean King of Kings, Nebūchadnezzar King of Babylon. The northern province of the Kingdom of Israel had already been conquered by the Assyrians, and their fate needs to be further investigated. The ultimate objective of this research within a broader project is to show that the provincial First Temple was governed jointly by both proto-Kurds, such as Medians together with tribal notables of the Kingdom of Israel.

Keywords: Daniel's visions, Belshazzar and Belteshazzar, Kurdish epic, Kurdish Succession of Kings, creation of the Temple site, creation of mankind

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Introduction

Daniel was a visionary, and although he is considered to be a “prophet” in Islam, in the sense of the Hebrew Bible he was not a Prophet. That is, Daniel’s visions were not directed to a collective.

Daniel’s name suggests that he was born to one of the tribes of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, only two having survived as known entities from the Twelve Tribes that we know from records concerning the Kingdom of Israel. The “lost tribes” were named Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulun. The point I wish to make is that one of those was the tribe of “Dan” like in the name “Dan-i-El.” Yet Daniel is introduced as arriving in Babylon due to the Babylonian conquest, the southern Kingdom of Judah.² The “i” in Daniel’s name connects to the word “El (the Almighty).”

The Book of Daniel is written by a visionary with various names, such as “Belteshazzar” and more, in the ongoing cycles of his ongoing identity as the bearer of the tradition emanating from the Creation of the Temple site in UrShalīm al-Kuds (see below Daniel 8:11-14).³

The relationship of the proto-Kurds, the Sumerians, to their Hebrew “cousins” as far as I know has not been established. However, it is evident that the *Book of Daniel* is another book of the Hebrew Bible that exhibits the techniques of Kurdish oral and written traditions of epic and chronicle (Butt, 2023). Moreover, the language of Daniel’s words which is usually described as “biblical Aramaic” is in actuality a variety of Kurdish Neo-Aramaic.

In the Introduction to the collection of articles entitled *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan*, Omarkhali (2014) writes:

The Jews in Kurdistan see themselves as descendants of the ten tribes exiled by the ancient Assyrians and departed in three major waves between the 8th and the 6th centuries BCE. . . . Translations of the Bible into Neo-Aramaic dialects were often transmitted orally without

² The southern kingdom included the city of UrShalīm al-Kuds, and the territories of the Kings of Judah and Benjamin. It is possible that some of the inhabitants of the northern kingdom found refuge there from the earlier Assyrian onslaughts on the northern kingdom.

³ Salīm Barakāt, modern Kurdish author, in his narrative *Sages of Darkness*, offers his readers a chance to experience a society which sees life in terms of phenomena such as a cyclic life with his fictitious character “Bekas.” An English translation of Salim Barakat’s *Sages of Darkness* is forthcoming.

writing. Literacy was available mostly only for the rabbis (*ḥakhamim*), who used manuscripts for their preparations and ceremonies.

*The first and native language of the Jews in Kurdistan was Neo-Aramaic, while their second language was Kurdish. Their religious literature was usually translated into Neo-Aramaic from Hebrew sources, while the secular literature mostly derived from Kurdish, Arabic, or other Near Eastern sources.*⁴

The first six chapters or episodes in the *Book of Daniel* are followed by a series of Daniel's visions. Chapter One is in Hebrew and tells of the youth Daniel's relocation from Urshalīm to the palace of the King of Kings Nebūchadnezzar King of Babylon together with three companions. They were educated in the language and life of Mesopotamia. Daniel then recounts in Aramaic, both spoken and written, how he supported the King with his understanding of the imagery in the King's dreams—an imagery that was sometimes highly unpleasant. Chapter Seven is central to the book. It links the epic to the chronicle and explains the essential, according to Daniel: *the sum total of the issues*. This study does not touch on the chronicling of the wars of anonymous kings.

Chapters Seven and Eight: Visions

Chapter Seven takes place in the first year after the king Nebūchadnezzar's death.⁵ It opens with dreams of Daniel's visions floating by him (dreams he wrote down) until he comes to what he thinks of as *the sum total of the issues*, about which he (also) speaks, and which describe the Creation:

In the first year of Belshazzar King of Babylon Daniel dreamed a vision.

And dreamed of the visions in his mind upon his couch

Then he wrote down the dream, and spoke the sum total of the issues [1]⁶

Daniel spoke and said: A vision came to me among [other] visions with nightfall

Behold, the four winds of the heavens sprang up upon the great sea [2]

And four huge animals were tossed out of the sea, diverse this from that [3]

⁴ Omarkhali is referring to Yona Sabar's article: *Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic Literature of Kurdistan Jews*, pp. 301-320.

⁵ Nebūchadnezzar II was a Babylonian King of Kings who ruled from 605-562 BCE, all in all forty-three years!

⁶ The numbers in brackets are placed at the end of verses. Brackets [] in general indicate something added to the text. Sometimes the brackets indicate the translator's filling in of lacunae, i.e., missing text.

The first was like a lion, with wings of an eagle.

The vision remained until the wings were [abruptly] plucked from its body

And it was washed up onto dryland and made to stand on two feet as a human

And a human heart was given it [4]⁷

Daniel 7:4 tells of the creation of the first human who was washed up onto dryland [from the great sea] and made to stand on two feet as a human, and *a human heart was given it*. The human heart as different from an animal's heart would prove to make all the difference. With the wings having been plucked from its body, it did not become an angel! It is in these verses, that the dramatic essential of this epic is established. Here, the plot point and theme (*the sum total of the issues*) is presented and has yet to be developed.

Still in the same chapter, Chapter Seven, there is another story to be told, a chronicle recording the Succession of Kings in Mesopotamia (Shin'ar). After several verses describing the appearance of fierce animals and eventually an animal with ten horns, Daniel continues:

I was looking at the horns, when behold another small horn came up between them.

And three of the front horns were plucked from their former [roots]

And behold in that horn were eyes like human eyes and a mouth murmuring incessantly [8]

I watched until thrones arose, and the Ancient of Days was seated

His clothing, white like snow.

The hair on his head, like clean wool.

His throne was the flames of a fire, its wheels the lit fire⁸ [9]

A stream of flames opposite and issuing from in front of him.

Thousands upon thousands administered to Him,

Ten thousand times tens of thousands stood ready before Him

To reverse the judgment. And the Books were open [10]

⁷ The present translation of the *Book of Daniel* is an updated translation done by the present writer, Aviva Butt. There is still to my knowledge no Lexicon of Kurdish Neo-Aramaic.

⁸ *Fire*, symbolizing protection.

What Daniel saw in the imagery of his vision were successive kings, division of their kingdoms, conquests, and so on. The Succession of Kings is referred to by the name “Belshazzar,” here the succession that would succeed the Babylonian King of Kings Nebūchadnezzar.

*I watched—then [along] with the voice of the incessant words that the horn murmured
I watched until the animal was killed, its body destroyed and sacrificed to the burning fire [11]*

In the above verse, Daniel describes the ritual in the First Temple for the expiation, that is, the atonement of sins to obtain the reversal for the collective of the Almighty’s judgment. *Ten thousand times tens of thousands stood ready before Him // To reverse the judgment and the Books were open [10]*. The poet Salim Barakat, fills in with more detail and describes the queue awaiting judgment as a stampede, an unceasing march filled with anxiety about broken covenants:

*The stoves are heating up, O Evil. The number of fires revived midst the jabber of the fruits.
Do you see? Chrysanthemums recite to the blighted shores what the cuckoo bird forgot.
Do you see? Broken artifacts and a thin leaf of bark as if the brink of nihility separating the
Bulging jugular vein in evening’s wrist. And also, the witnesses, drip from the cut vein
Of a Judgment
A Covenant;⁹
Violated;
Seals;
The stampede in full swing eclipsed;¹⁰*

Daniel continues, telling of his vision of *a sort of human being* standing before a personification of the Almighty:

*I watched the visions at night
And behold [along] with the clouds in the heavens, a sort of human-being was coming*

⁹ Shift-in-meaning: *Judgment / Covenant dīn*.

¹⁰ An excerpt from Barakat’s 30-page poem *The Obscure (al-Mu‘jam)* as translated in Aviva Butt (2021), *Salim Barakat, Mahmud Darwish, and the Kurdish and Palestinian Similitude: Qamishli Extended: With Anthology of Poems* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing).

And he came as far as the Ancient of Days. And advancing he was brought before Him [13]

And Daniel saw in his vision that there was a prototype on High for the earthly king. And he was made to understand that he needed to explain to the earthly king that there was another eternal Kingdom, a primordial kingdom on High and an Ancient of Days that ruled:

To Him is granted dominion and glory and a Kingdom

All the peoples, nations, and language [groups] shall pay homage to Him

His dominion shall be eternal, and not be eradicated.

His kingdom shall not be destroyed [14]

Inside my sheath, I Daniel, my internal dimension foregone¹¹

The visions in my head made me panic [15]

I came near to one of the standers-by. And I asked him the truth about all this

And he told me and made me understand the meaning of the issues: [16]

What becomes clear is that because the Ancient of Days appeared along with the vision of the Succession of Kings, the Succession of Kings as a chronicle not only as an epic started from the time of the Creation.

The next chapter, Chapter Eight repeats something of Chapter Seven, but is less folkloristic and more scholarly. As Omarkhali remarks above, the religious literature of Jews in Kurdistan “was usually translated into Neo-Aramaic from Hebrew sources.” The latter halves of both chapters tell something of the Succession of Kings in both Shin‘ar and UrShalīm al-Kuds, and this city’s roundabouts. The Babylonian kings (Chaldean dynasty) were aware that at times their history was linked to Kurdish history.¹² So when Daniel informed the king about the alliance of the Medes and Persians that would defeat the King of Kings, Nebūchadnezzar and his successors, we are not told how “Belshazzar” felt. Just that Belshazzar died next day. It was Daniel who panicked. . . The following is the first half of Chapter Seven:

¹¹ *Inside my sheath*: protected in his body. *Foregone* : The English word “foregone” has a double meaning as with the Aramaic.

¹² See Katrien De Graef (2022). Chapter 16: The Middle East after the Fall of Ur. In: *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*. Oxford University Press. I thank Professor Daniel T. Potts, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York City: NYU—for sending me this chapter on academia.edu.

DANIEL'S VISION in the first year after Nebūchadnezzar's death

Episode / Chapter Seven: verses 1 – 16 (The whole chapter has 28 verses)

In the first year of Belshazzar King of Babylon Daniel dreamed a vision.

And dreamed of the visions in his mind upon his couch

Then he wrote down the dream, and spoke the sum total of the issues [1]

Daniel spoke and said: A vision came to me among [other] visions with nightfall

Behold, the four winds of the heavens sprang up upon the great sea [2]

And four huge animals were tossed out of the sea, diverse this from that [3]

The first was like a lion, with wings of an eagle.

The vision remained until the wings were [abruptly] plucked from its body

And it was washed up onto dryland and made to stand on two feet as a human

And a human heart was given it ¹³[4]

And behold. Another animal. A second similar to a bear. And it was raised to one side.

And the three ribs in its mouth were between its teeth. And thus they said to it:

Arise, devastate. . devour flesh [5]

After that, when seeing visions at night. Behold. Another. Like a leopard.

And its wings were four fowl on its back. And the animal had four heads

And dominion was bequeathed it [6]

After that, when seeing visions at night. Behold. A fourth animal, fierce and threatening

And exceedingly powerful. It had huge teeth of iron.

It swallowed and crunched. And stamped on the rest with its feet.

And it was different from all the animals before. It had ten horns [7]

I was looking at the horns, when behold another small horn came up between them.

And three of the front horns were plucked from their former [roots]

¹³ *Heart* The verse (Daniel 7:4) is a telling of the creation of the first man.

And behold in that horn were eyes like human eyes and a mouth murmuring incessantly [8]

*I watched until thrones arose, and the Ancient of Days was seated
His clothing, white like snow. The hair on his head, like clean wool.
His throne was the flames of a fire, its wheels the lit fire¹⁴ [9]*

*A stream of flames opposite and issuing from in front of him.
Thousands upon thousands administered to Him,¹⁵
Ten thousand times tens of thousands stood ready before Him
To reverse the judgment and the Books were open [10]*

*I watched—then [along] with the voice of the incessant words that the horn murmured
I watched until the animal was killed, its body destroyed and sacrificed to the burning fire [11]*

*And [as for] the rest of the animals.
Their dominion was eradicated. But their lives were prolonged
Without hurry, until the time appointed [12]*

*I watched the visions at night
And behold [along] with the clouds in the heavens, a sort of human-being was coming
And he came as far as the Ancient of Days. And advancing he was brought before Him [13]*

*To Him is granted dominion and glory and a Kingdom¹⁶
All the peoples, nations, and language [groups] shall pay homage to Him
His dominion shall be eternal, and not be eradicated.
His kingdom shall not be destroyed [14]*

*Inside my sheath, I Daniel, my internal dimension foregone¹⁷
The visions in my head made me panic [15]*

I came near to one of the standers-by. And I asked him the truth about all this

¹⁴ Fire, symbolizing protection.

¹⁵ Administered to Him, i.e., took care of His needs.

¹⁶ To Him is granted dominion . . . The lesson Daniel preaches to the earthly King is in this line and the next (vs. 14).

¹⁷ Inside my sheath: protected in his body. Foregone : The English word “foregone” has a double meaning as with the Aramaic.

And he told me and made me understand the meaning of the issues: [16]

The above chapter as can be seen describes the Creation of mankind and in Verse 13 tells of the meeting of the shadowy presence suggestive of a King with the Ancient of Days. The next chapter, Daniel 8:11-14 adds a description of the Creation of the Temple site in Urshalīm al-Kuds:

DANIEL'S VISION in the third year of the kingdom of Belshazzar

Episode / Chapter Eight vss. 1 – 18 (the whole chapter has 27 verses)

In the third year of the Kingdom of Belshazzar the King—a vision appeared to me Daniel. After what had appeared to me at first ¹⁸ [1]

And I [again] appeared in the vision.

And it came to pass upon looking that I was in Shushan the capital in the province of Elam: And I saw in the vision that I was looking through the clear water of the Ulay [River]¹⁹ [2]

And I raised my eyes and looked.

And I beheld one ram standing before the watercourse.²⁰

And it had two horns. And both horns were long,

But one was longer than the other. And the longer [one] protruded last ²¹[3]

I saw the ram butt westward and northward and southward.

And none of the beasts could oppose it. And there was no rescue from its power.

It did as it wished and aggrandized itself [4]

And while I was gazing,²²

Behold a goat horn came from the west over all the land

And did not touch the land. And the young buck [had] a prominent horn between its eyes ²³[5]

And it came at the ram with the two horns that I had seen—standing before the watercourse. And it ran towards [the ram], in the heat of its strength [6]

¹⁸ At first: See Daniel 7:13.

¹⁹ That is, Daniel could see the riverbed through the clear water of the river.

²⁰ ram, lord or nobleman.

²¹ See 8:20: The two horns were the Kings of Media and Persia.

²² The medieval commentator Rashi: (Rashi: I understood—I was watching it.)

²³ The young buck with the single prominent horn symbolizes the power of the Greek Empire of antiquity.

*And I saw it come close to the ram, and it was enraged and smote the ram
And broke its two horns. And there was no strength in the ram to take a stand.
It hurled the ram to the ground trampling it. And there was no saving the ram from its power [7]*

*And the young buck grew exceedingly; and as of itself the great horn broke,
And under the surface were four cores,²⁴ [facing] towards the four directions of the heavens²⁵ [8]*

And from one of them, a small horn came out; and it grew—

Towards the Negev and towards the East, and towards the [mountain] gazelle²⁶ [9]

And it grew towards the hosts of the heavens. And some of the hosts

And some of the stars fell to the earth. And it trampled them [10]

And the Eternal,²⁷ the chief of hosts made it grow [towards the heavens].

And from Him the Eternal Hūram, [the burnt offering]

And placement of His Temple were hurled [to the earth] [11]²⁸

And hosts were situated above the perpetual offering-for-transgression.

And truth was hurled to the earth, and it functioned and prospered [12]

And I actually heard a holy being speak. Indeed, the speaker, a holy one, was saying:

Until when will you allow the perpetual vision of burnt offering

And transgression's devastation—and what is holy and of the hosts—be trampled [13]

And he said to me: When dusk is dawn, two thousand and three hundred [times]:

Then shall the Temple be sanctified [14]²⁹

²⁴ The animal's horn fits into a "core."

²⁵ *Directions*: The Hebrew is meaning the inner dimensions of the "directions." See the first kabbalistic midrash =*Atzilut, Beriah, Yetzirah, 'Asiah*, i.e., the four worlds of the Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation). <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/35/8/8> . [This is the](https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/35/8/8) oldest Judaic medieval kabbalah, the Creation pictured as the Tree of Life.

²⁶ deer or gazelle. Rabbi Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra explains: "Deer" means to all the lands. <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/35/8/9> .

²⁷ *And the Eternal* is translated according to Isaiah 57:15: Eternal and Holy is His Name.

²⁸ Verses 11-14 tell how the placement for the Temple in UrShalīm al-Kuds was prepared.

²⁹ See Salim Barakat's epic poem *al-Mu'jam* (The Obscure), in Aviva Butt (2021), *Salim Barakat, Mahmud Darwish, and the Kurdish and Palestinian Similitude: Qamishli Extended* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing). The poet explains how time rolls over before the End. He calls upon his persona "Evil" to help him make the twilight-dawn roll over one more time. That is, there are two twilights, before dusk and before dawn. Dusk and dawn are both *fajr*.

And it came to pass that when "I" Daniel saw my vision, and I sought understanding, Behold opposite me stood the image of a man [15]

And I heard a human voice, roundabout the Ulay [River]. And it called out and said: Gabriel, make that one understand the vision [16]³⁰

And it drew near to where I stood. And when it approached, I was terrified and fell on my face. And [the voice] said to me: Know, O son of Adam, that the vision is of the End of Time [17]

And as it was speaking to me, I fell into a deep sleep on my face towards the ground; And it touched me and stood me up [18]

According to Daniel 8:18, Daniel fell on his face and went into a deep sleep, which is to say, he was absent. He did not see or hear the part of the vision that would have told him exactly when the End of Time would come. He was again brought to life, to live into another cycle due to a touch that is worded in a way reminiscent of the description of the Creation of mankind, *it touched me and stood me up*.

The imagery of the touch brings to mind the outstretched hand, the finger of the hand, depicted in Michelangelo's famous mural (painted c. 1508–1512) on the vaulted ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.³¹

All that Daniel was left with was that the End would eventually come, and he would understand closer to that time: *And it said: Behold, I shall make known to you what has ended my forbearance,³²/ Since it shall be at the appointed time of the End³³ [19]*

Conclusion

Chapters Seven and Eight present the reader with a cumulative and logical account of seeming pre-determined events. The *Book of Daniel* in this way serves as a source-book for our research into logical outcomes in the human history of civilization as it started from the time of the Creation, ventured into the No-Time, and is, it seems, left in perpetual anxiety about the

³⁰ *Gabriel*: an angel. Daniel in the intermediate world (barzakh) calls upon the angel to inform Daniel (*that one*), the earthly onlooker.

³¹ The Sistine Chapel mural is said to depict Genesis in the Pentateuch, the bringing to life of Adam. The story of the Creation in the *Book of Daniel* is a different tradition, one that effectively contrasts the world above with the world below.

³² *[At the end of] my forbearance*: The Hebrew (wrath) uses its opposite meaning, which is "forbearance." An example of the many contronyms in the *Book of Daniel*.

³³ *Shall be*: a double-duty verb.

perpetuation of the tradition of the Temple site with its burnt offering to provide us with a future history:

And the Eternal, the chief of hosts made it grow [towards the heavens].

And from Him the Eternal Hūram, [the burnt offering]

And placement of His Temple were hurled [to the earth] [11]

And hosts were situated above the perpetual offering-for-transgression.

And truth was hurled to the earth, and it [the earth] functioned and prospered [12]

Unfortunately, the Jewish sages, the Rabbis of the Common Era, prepared the final two books of the Hebrew Bible (Chronicles I and Chronicles II) largely with the future of religious ritual in the Exile in mind. That is, they describe the Jewish commemoration of historical events to be observed in houses of worship throughout the dispersal and subsequent life of Jewish populations. Unfortunately, unfortunately, they seem to have let bygones be bygones only to be repeated ad infinitum.

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³⁴ MT: Masoretic Text.