

Sovereignty & The Pagan Power-State: Studies in Daniel

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Divine Sovereignty: asserted by Daniel

Every chapter of this book clearly asserts the sovereignty of God. In referring to the lesson of fulfilled prophecy that Daniel provides for the church, the translator's preface to Calvin's commentary on Daniel points out that, "they [fulfilled prophecies] display His ceaseless dominion over the wills of Sovereigns and over the destinies of Nations."^[1]

Rushdoony comments,

The Book of Daniel, which begins very innocently with a chapter involving the diet of four young men, is nonetheless one of the most explosive books in all human history in that it assumes at every point a philosophy of history which is anathema to autonomous man. Not only is this concept of history assumed as an article of faith, but it is asserted as in very deed manifested in the minute details of history by a sovereign God whose eternal decree does in fact mark the sparrow's fall and numbers the very hairs of man's head ... To assert such a faith in retrospect is one thing, to assert it in prospect, another. In Daniel, it is asserted in prospect and verified by the courses of men and empire, if Daniel is to be taken at face value.^[2]

Divine Sovereignty: trusted by Daniel & friends

Daniel assumes, and indeed proclaims, the total providence and government of God in the control and destiny of men and nations; and it was in this confidence that Daniel and his three friends could serve in Babylon's courts 'as to the Lord and not unto men': "Such service is possible only if the God served is He by whose decree kings reign, the sparrow falls, and masters exercise authority." In the very first chapter, therefore, the issue of sovereignty is brought into sharp focus with the claim of Babylon to a cosmic unity and paradise apart from God, while Daniel and his three friends, in this alien climate, stand for the jealous requirements of Jehovah, who alone is the Creator-God and King of kings. In their faithfulness to God in the abstinence from food offered in pagan worship, the sovereign Lord is proven to be guarding even the health and physical well-being of these Hebrew youths.

Divine Sovereignty: vanquishes the pagan power-state's one-world paradise

While Nebuchadnezzar, the agent of the Babylonian dream of continuity and cosmic unity, is sleeping, he is dramatically reminded of his mortality and creatureliness in the terror of a dream. Prior to sleep he has been pondering the future of his great empire and the dream of a one-world paradise (2:29). After succumbing to sleep, he is subjected to a dream from God that confirms his fears of mutability and the final destruction of Babylon and man's attempt at god-likeness. Daniel interprets the dream, depending on the wisdom of an omniscient and all-powerful God who determines the end of empires from their beginning, governing all things according to His pleasure; and delineates the rise and fall of four of these empires, depicted as a proud, pseudo-messianic image of man consisting of head and shoulders of gold and deteriorating from chest and arms of silver, an abdomen of brass to feet of iron and clay, finally terminating in a total collapse, and destruction by a fifth empire. In contrast to the mutability and demise of the four empires of man, the fifth is indestructible:

In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (2:44).

This is understood to represent the kingdom of Christ in the church subduing both the Roman Empire and all systems that deify man. "Thus, God the omnipotent reigns, not a God on the sidelines who merely awards prizes to the determiners of history, but God the Lord, who ordains all things and by whose will alone kings reign, empires fall, and in terms of whose will alone history has purpose, meaning and direction."^[3]

After the interpretation of the dream, Nebuchadnezzar, inflated by his false Babylonian concept of continuity, constructed “an image of gold” on the plain of Dura at which all must bow and worship. This image, to the king, no doubt embodied his flawed understanding of the dream, in which he appeared as the head of gold, the glory of which preceded the historic continuity of the one-world order and the kingdom of man. The refusal of Daniel’s three friends to pay homage to the image provoked a rage in Nebuchadnezzar; this fueled by his sharing in the “glory of God” and partaking of “divinity”. Their intransigent attitude to the image was in effect a rejection of “both God and God’s incarnate glory”.^[4] Tolerance was shown to lesser deities but not to a God who also claimed sovereign allegiance. Polytheism was permissible only so long as the primacy of the state was affirmed. Again, in this book, divine sovereignty and the claim of the state to the same are in focus. For their resistance to these false claims to sovereignty, the three rebels are thrown into the fiery furnace (3:23). A fourth man appears who, according to Nebuchadnezzar, “is like the Son of God” (3:25). They are thus delivered unhurt and Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges the supremacy and sovereignty of God:

Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any God except their own God (3:28).

He recognizes the transcendence of their God and his interposition in the overruling of the king’s command.

As God’s dealings with Nebuchadnezzar progress, he again dreams, but this time of a tree or ‘pole’ symbolizing the “ritual centre of the earth”^[5]. It is the bond between heaven and earth, demonstrating the religious claims of the Babylonian concept of continuity. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tree is quite natural in view of his self-perception as God incarnate, the meeting of the human and the divine. However, the tree is felled and only a stump remains as a mute reminder of its former glory, of its great height and sprawling branches under which many found shelter and sustenance. Daniel, interpreting the dream, advises the king that he will be driven away from human society and live as an animal until he “acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” (4:25). The dream is dramatically fulfilled, and afterward Nebuchadnezzar confesses:

Then I praised the Most High’ I honoured and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: ‘What have you done?’ (4:34,35)

Calvin comments in this regard, “God is not only supreme in the sense of sustaining all things by his universal providence, but because no one without his will obtains empire at all. He binds some with a belt, and looseth the bonds of others, as it is said in the book of Job (12:18). We ought not, therefore, to imagine God’s power to be at rest, but we should join it with present action... Whether tyrants obtain power, or sovereigns are pious and just, all are governed by God’s secret counsel, since otherwise there could be no king of the world.”^[6]

Divine Sovereignty: overthrows the pagan power-state as mediator of cosmic unity

While Nebuchadnezzar’s faith was effective in his lifetime, it did not flow on into Babylonian history, as manifested in Belshazzar’s sacrilegious use of the temple vessels in a pagan religious festival presided over by himself as the priest-king—the mediator of cosmic unity and continuity (ch.5). This was done in open defiance of Jehovah, drinking from the temple vessels as “they praised their gods” (5:4). However, in that very hour a man’s hand appeared and wrote an unknown inscription on the wall, striking terror in the hearts of all present. After the failure of the king’s counselors to interpret this writing, it is advised that Daniel be called. Belshazzar feigns ignorance of Daniel’s previous interpretation of the dreams which, when fulfilled, served to humble Nebuchadnezzar and ultimately extract a repentance and confession as to the sovereignty and power of God over all, including himself. Daniel reminds Belshazzar of this dramatic piece of history (5:18-21), concluding with the verdict: “But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold ... but you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription” (5:22-24). The interpretation of the writing then shows that Belshazzar’s days are numbered, that his kingdom is finished. That very night he is slain by Darius the

Mede who conquers and presides over the Babylonian kingdom.

Divine Sovereignty: overrules the fiat law of the pagan power-state

In Darius is discovered a highly developed form of the priestly kingship of a monarch acting as mediator between God and man; he is the link between heaven and earth, and in fact, is the incarnate law of God, although he, himself, is bound by that law: “the law of the Medes and the Persians which altereth not” (6:8)—the *fiat* law of the pagan power-state. So when Darius, at the behest of his administrators, decrees that for thirty days anyone praying to a god apart from the king forfeits their lives by being thrown to the lions, is powerless to change what has gone forth, despite his own distress and grief at what, as a consequence, befalls Daniel (6:10-14). God, the sovereign and merciful Lord, delivers Daniel from certain death in the lion’s den at which the king expresses great relief and declares: “... in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end” (6:26). Calvin comments, “Here he clearly expresses what he had formerly stated respecting the firmness of God’s estate, since he not only remains essentially the same, but exercises his power throughout the whole world, and governs the world by his own virtue, and sustains all things.”^[7] Daniel’s God has overruled the “law of the Medes and the Persians”, decisively demonstrating for Darius the true source of sovereignty. Calvin feels, though, that this is only recognition by Darius of God’s pre-eminent power, rather than a manifestation of actual saving faith.^[8]

Divine Sovereignty: exerted through Christ’s kingdom & church

Daniel’s vision of the four beasts (ch.7) asserts the sovereignty of Christ’s kingdom in the church. Most commentators agree that Daniel’s four beasts represent in order: the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian and Roman Empires.^[9]

(These four world empires also match those of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the metal image in Dan. 2) The attention here, however, is focused on Daniel’s fourth nondescript beast about which Calvin states, “I have no doubt that in this vision the prophet was shown the figure of the Roman Empire”^[10] It is significant that both these prophetic revelations to Daniel (ch. 2 & 7) culminate in the coming of the kingdom of God:

In the time of those kings [i.e. the Roman Empire], the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will, itself, endure forever (Dan. 2:44);

In my vision at night, I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Dan. 7:13,14).

Pusey states, “the KINGDOM is the word of Daniel”.^[11] The metal image, representing a human form, demonstrates in its gradually inferior metals the degenerating and weakening expression of humanistic world-power until the kingdom of God falls destructively on the metal and clay feet of the image (the Roman Empire) and gradually fills the whole earth. Again, it is at the point of Daniel’s fourth beast (the Roman Empire) that the “son of man” ascends to the “Ancient of Days” and is given authority and dominion over the kingdoms of this world.

Commenting on these verses Calvin teaches,

This, in my judgement, ought to be explained of Christ’s ascension; for he then commenced his reign... He now arrives at the Ancient of Days, that is, when he ascends to heaven, because his divine majesty was then revealed. And hence he says, ‘It is expedient for you. For me to go to the Father, because the Father is greater than I’ (Jn. 14:28). ...after Christ had passed through the period of his self-abasement, according to Paul (Phil.2:7), he ascended into heaven, and a dominion was bestowed upon him... this passage, then, without the slightest doubt, ought to be received of Christ’s ascension... .” He then continues to explain the purpose of the ascension, “... For although Christ truly ascended into heaven (Matt. 28:18), yet we ought clearly to weigh the purpose of his doing so. It was to acquire the supreme power in heaven and in earth, as he himself says. Paul also mentions this purpose in the first and second chapters of the Ephesians (1:21; 2:7). Christ left the world and ascended to the Father; first to subdue all powers to himself, and to render angels obedient; next to restrain the devil, and to protect and preserve the Church by his help, as well as all the

elect of God the Father.[\[12\]](#)

Divine Sovereignty: climaxes in the First Advent

The prophetic focus of Scripture is thus the first advent, and not the second, as many would suggest. As Cox states, “The world has never realized a greater event than that which Christians know as the incarnation, or first advent of our Lord. If we might paraphrase a statement of Tennyson: more things were accomplished by our Lord’s earthly sojourn than this world ever dreamed. And yet, no event in history has been so misunderstood, or so lacking in appreciation. Much of this misunderstanding has grown out of the tendency to minimize the first advent in order to relegate everything of any importance to the end of time. This grows out of the failure to realize that the ‘last days’ have already begun.”[\[13\]](#) Daniel, then, sets forth and asserts the demise of humanistic world-power (in the time of the Roman Empire) through the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom at his ascension and the consequent outpouring of his Spirit and advance of the Gospel. Climaxing in Christ and his church, God’s sovereignty is asserted, throughout Daniel, over that of the pagan power-state’s pretension to godhood and sovereignty. Hence, the current iteration of the humanistic world-system – merely a renaissance of the pagan power-state – is already judged and defeated. Christ’s advent was the stone cast on the feet of the human colossus; every statist claim to sovereignty has already been destroyed. History is, thus, now rendered the mopping-up operation of a defeated enemy—the fifth and final empire of Daniel is now filling the earth. From the time of Christ’s advent the kingdom of God has been advancing; it is uprooting every pagan system and becomes the final world civilisation. Just as the pagan systems were visible, real-world civilisations, so also the kingdom of God in and through the church.

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References

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- [\[3\]](#) *ibid*, p.20
- [\[4\]](#) *ibid*, p.23
- [\[5\]](#) *ibid*, p.28
- [\[6\]](#) Calvin, *op cit*, p. 292
- [\[7\]](#) *op cit*, p.392
- [\[8\]](#) *op cit*, pp.393, 394
- [\[9\]](#) C.F. Keil, “Commentary on the OT”, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) Vol.9, Ezk. & Dan., p. 265;
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- Calvin, *op cit*, pp. 13-25
- [\[10\]](#) Calvin, *op cit*, p. 21
- [\[11\]](#) Pusey, *op cit*, p. 131
- [\[12\]](#) Calvin, *op cit*, pp. 42-44
- [\[13\]](#) W.E. Cox, “Biblical Studies in Final Things”, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R, 1966) p. 15

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