

Contextualization in Daniel's Use of God's Names for Cross-Cultural Witness to Nebuchadnezzar

By Sung Ik Kim

The book of Daniel has many cultural aspects that illustrate how God uses culture to efficiently communicate his salvific purpose in a cross-cultural setting. The book also shows how Daniel witnessed to his faith in the God of Heaven in front of heathen kings using their language and cultural forms. Although the book of Daniel shows that both God and Daniel were sensitive to the local culture as they communicated God's message, only a few scholars have paid any attention to the book of Daniel as a missionary document with cross-cultural perspectives and insights. Al-

though there are many cultural aspects in the book of Daniel, in this article I will only discuss how Daniel contextualized God's names for his cross-cultural witness to Nebuchadnezzar.

The First Dream of Nebuchadnezzar

Although the king's dream threatened the lives of Daniel and his friends, God intervened and changed the crisis into an opportunity for witness. As a response to the revelation of God, Daniel praised the "God of Heaven," "God of my [his] fathers" in the form of a brief song that expressed several key theological concepts concerning history (2:19-23, all texts from the NIV). God's sovereignty included the message that: (1) God changes times and seasons; (2) God sets up kings and deposes them; (3) God gives wisdom; and (4) God reveals deep and hidden things (vv. 20-23) (Shea 1996:136). The reason why this song is important is because it shows that Daniel's understanding of God gives insight concerning the message he would share with the king.



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God in Heavens

After Daniel pointed out the failure of the other wise men of Babylon (2:27; cf. 2:10-11), he went on to talk about “a God in heaven” who reveals mysteries of the future through a dream (vv. 28, 44; cf. Dan 2:18; Ezra 1:2; 6:10; 7:12, 21; Neh 1:5; 2:4). Goldingay suggests that “a God in Heaven” parallels “the Most High” (Dan 3:26; 4:2, 25; 5:1, 21; 7:25, 27) both in general meaning and in resembling gentile titles for God of the kind that Jews sometimes could feel appropriate for Yahweh (Goldin-

In reply to the king, the wise men tried to temper their failure by asserting the difficulty of the king’s request: “No one can reveal it to the king except the gods” (v. 11). This was a striking confession on the part of the wise men because they admitted that they could not—as they previously had insisted they could—contact the divine realm and know such information (Wood 1973:54).

Besides, they mentioned “gods who do not live among men,” meaning, “gods [who] lived above men, not with them”

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gay 1989:47; Rose 1992:1004). Frederick W. Schmidt also explains that the term *elyōn*, meaning ‘the Exalted One,’ was a title given to the highest of the gods in the Canaanite pantheon and was appropriated by the Hebrews as a title for Yahweh (Schmidt 1992:4:922). By using a general title for deities in that region of the world, Daniel began to talk about his God in a way to build common ground with other religious groups. In this process, Daniel never sacrificed the absoluteness of his God.

(1973:55), saying, “their home is not among mere human beings” (Goldingay 1989:30). By adding this expression, they seemed to acknowledge that they were not in communion with this type of deity (Bultema 1988:71). Moreover, the wise men admitted that their gods who live among men cannot reveal the content of the king’s dream (Miller 1994:83).

However, Daniel insisted that his God was the true God, because his God reveals things on earth (v. 28). Through this comparison, Daniel sought to

turn the king's eyes to the true God in heaven, the God of the Hebrews, whose people had been conquered by the king (SDABC 4:770).

God of the Fathers

After building common ground, Daniel gave further details concerning the identity of the God in heaven by using another title, "God of my fathers" (v. 23). Daniel's use of the personal pronoun "my" signified Daniel's intimacy with God (Montgomery 1927:158). "God of the fathers" was also a title for God used by Israel's ancestors before the revelation to Moses (Exod 3:13-16), but it came into increased usage after the exile, especially in Chronicles (1 Chr 5:25; 12:17; 2 Chr 33:12). Thus this title in Dan 2:23, "God of my fathers," may suggest a recognition that God is acting in this present situation just as faithfully as he did in Israel's past and could also indicate that the God of his fathers is the true God in Heaven, in contrast to the Babylonian gods (Goldingay 1989:48).

By using the phrase "God in Heaven," which is similar with the "lord of heaven," a popular ancient Near Eastern appellation of deity, Daniel showed how he was involved in religious dialogue. Although he began his dialogue with building common ground by using similar gentile titles, he went on to stress that God in heaven reveals things on earth and that the God of his

fathers was still acting in the present situation.

Great God

In the process of interpreting the king's dream, Daniel continued to emphasize the sovereignty of God in the course of history (2:37, 44, 45, 47). The purpose of the dream was that the God of heaven wanted Nebuchadnezzar to recognize the supremacy of divine power (Fewell 1988:33). This is also clearly shown in Daniel's designation of God as "the Great God" (v. 45). In the Old Testament, the phrase "Great God" is used in an absolute sense as a parallel expression of "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" (Deut 10:17; cf. Neh 8:6; Ps 95:3).

The ancient Near Eastern gods were also designated as the great gods (Pritchard 1955, e.g., Marduk [66]; Ashuramazda [316]). Although there were disputes as to the supremacy between different gods, Marduk was most certainly at the head of the Babylonian pantheon during Daniel's time (Boutflower 1977:93). Thus, by using the phrase "Great God," Daniel put his God in the place of Marduk (1977:98).

Again, Daniel explained the identity of his true great God in detail. The adjective "great" parallels "the rock that struck the statue became a huge [great] mountain and filled the whole earth" (2:35). Both adjectives are the word *rab*. Daniel was witnessing that the God in Heaven

who reveals secrets and had shown the king what would take place in the future rules a great Kingdom and his dominion is universal, not regional. Daniel is saying that his true “great God” is far beyond the regional gods of Babylon.

Result of Witness

After Daniel finished interpreting the dream and told the king that “the great God has shown the king what will take place in the future” (2:45), the king “fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered

the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery” (2:47). The response of Nebuchadnezzar shows the result of Daniel’s witness. Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged Daniel’s God as “the God of gods.” In fact, the phrase “God of gods” had already been used prior to Daniel’s time (Deut 10:17; Ps 136:2). Daniel also used the phrase in a later vision (Dan 11:36). Duane L. Christensen suggests that this phrase is a “superlative construction” meaning “the kingship of God in an absolute

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that an offering and incense be presented to him” (2:46). The fact that the king immediately gave glory to Daniel and not to Daniel’s God (v. 47) seems to indicate that the heathen ruler ordered gifts given to Daniel because the king regarded him as Yahweh’s representative and indicates that the king had come to know “the gods whose dwelling is not with flesh” through Daniel (v. 11) (Miller 1994:103).

Nebuchadnezzar then testified about Daniel’s God: “Surely your God is the God of gods and

sense” (Christensen 1991:206). Montgomery confirms this: “In Sem[itic] such a combination as ‘god of gods’ is notoriously superlative” (Montgomery 1927:182) Thus Montgomery considers that Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the supremacy of Israel’s God (1927:181).

On the other hand, some scholars, such as Driver and Baldwin, think that Nebuchadnezzar’s designation of Daniel’s God as the “God of gods” is ambiguous, as is his next expression, “the Lord of kings” (v. 47). Driver suggests that the similar

titles "Lord of lords" and "Lord of gods" were "often given by the Babylonian kings to Marduk, the supreme god of Babylon" (Driver 1922:31). Baldwin says that "as a polytheist he can always add another to the deities he worships" (Baldwin 1978:95). If this line of reasoning is correct, the king, knowing that this was a title applied to Marduk in the Babylonian creation story (*SDABC* 4:777) only meant to say that "your God, Daniel, is mine; your power you owe to my god" (Doukhan 2000:40).

narrative shows that the king did not want to accept the content of the vision.

Second, although Daniel introduced the phrase "God in Heaven," the king referred to God as "your God" (vs. 46). Although the expression "the God of gods" had been used by the Israelites as a "superlative construction" meaning "the kingship of God in an absolute sense," Nebuchadnezzar seemed to use the phrase in a comparative sense only in the area of God's ability to reveal secrets. Although the king had irrefut-

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To discern whether or not the king was acknowledging God as the supreme God and indicating any movement towards conversion, several aspects of his response need to be discussed. First, the king was amazed at Daniel's ability to interpret dreams and was not initially concerned about the content (Collins 1977:34). He did not take any action in the light of his predicted future (Goldingay 1989:61). He offered a very plausible response, an acknowledgment of the God who revealed the future (Fewell 1988:37). Later, in chap. 3 the

able proof that Daniel's God was infinitely wiser than the gods of Babylon, he still believed in his gods, not Daniel's God.

However, it is notable that the king acknowledged a captive's God just a few years after destroying the temple of that God in Jerusalem. Through his encounter with Daniel, the king came to know the God in Heaven who reveals secrets, but he was not set free instantaneously from his native polytheistic presuppositions.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Nebuchadnezzar was doing his best at the time

to honor the one whose wisdom and power had been so impressively demonstrated, although he showed theological confusion with his limited knowledge of the true God (*SDABC* 4:777). Thus, at that point, Nebuchadnezzar could still be classified as a polytheist who recognized the existence of the gods of Babylon, but he was moving toward monotheism by acknowledging the superiority of Daniel's God, Yahweh (Shea 1996:147-149).

On the Plain of Dura

Power and Sovereignty of God

Although Daniel's three friends served a heathen king in a foreign court, they did not show allegiance in any way to any god except the true God. Daniel's friends clearly realized that even though the king's order to bow to the golden image seemed political on the surface and there was a possibility that Nebuchadnezzar was using religion for political means, they were sensitive to the religious purposes hidden in the request to bow down during the dedication of the image.

In the middle of their crisis, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were unafraid to declare their strong faith in the power of God to rescue them from the king's hand (3:17). It is notable that they made clear whom they served by using the phrase "the God we serve" (v. 17). They knew the limitation of religious

dialogue. They made clear whom they would serve and worship (vv. 17, 18).

Although they believed in the power of God, they also indicated their trust in God's sovereignty even if they should perish (vs. 18). This unconditional allegiance of Daniel's three friends shows the true nature of religion. Through the dramatic rescue from the furnace, God made it clear to Nebuchadnezzar, who believed his gods were stronger than Israel's God, who challenged Yahweh's power by erecting the golden image, and who equated Yahweh with his gods, that Judah's defeat was not because their God did not exist or was anemic (Miller 1994:126). However, Daniel's friends proclaimed that they would be faithful to their sovereign God under any circumstance. A demonstration of God's power often seems to be pivotal in a power-oriented mission field, but the testimony of Daniel's friends shows that Christian faith should be based on a loving relationship rather than on power.

Result of Witness

In reaction to the Chaldeans' accusation, the king commanded that Daniel's three friends be brought to him so he could persuade them (vv. 13-15). In the last part of his speech (v. 15b), the king threw out a challenge: "Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" This question reflects the king's pre-

vious experience with Daniel's God who revealed the content of his dream in chap. 2. He was saying that even such a great God would not be able to protect the men in the furnace (Miller 1994:126). The king also included his gods in the same category. Wood explains the king's words as "his determination to make them realize that no god existed who could deliver from his hand" (Wood 1973:88). With this expression of arrogance and challenge addressed to Yahweh, the king indirectly likened the God of the Jews to his own gods, who

cal Aramaic, the plural noun *'elahin* is used to refer not only to pagan gods (2:11, 47; 5:4, 23), but also to the true God (4:8, 9; 5:11, 14) (Goldingay 1989:71). In this context, it is doubtful that Nebuchadnezzar viewed the fourth being as a Babylonian deity based on his polytheistic view of gods. From the confession of the king (3:26, 28), it seems to be more reasonable that he recognized the fourth being as a divine person of Daniel's religion.

At last, the king invited the accusers to witness to the power of God through a question (v.

For Nebuchadnezzar, the Most High God was only for the Jews because the "God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" rescued only "his servants."

were impotent in such matters (SDABC 4:783).

In the narrative of chap. 2, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged only that Daniel's God could reveal mysteries. Nebuchadnezzar believed in God's existence, but he did not yet worship him. In chap. 3, by erecting the golden image, the king perhaps was retreating from his confession in 2:47.

In front of the furnace, however, Nebuchadnezzar gave witness that "the fourth looks like a son of the gods" (v. 25). What did "a son of the gods" mean to Nebuchadnezzar? In bibli-

24): "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" To Nebuchadnezzar, this proved to be one of the most challenging experiences concerning the power of God.

Nebuchadnezzar then called Daniel's friends "servants of the Most High God" (3:26). "The Most High God" alludes to the king's confession of "the Most High" in the previous chapter (2:47). The title "Most High God" was used by the gentiles such as Nebuchadnezzar (3:26; 4:2, 17, 34), Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20), and Balaam (Num 24:16). The term was also used

by Daniel (Dan 4:24, 25), Abram (Gen 14:22), Moses (Deut 32:8), Isaiah (Isa 14:14), and the voice that spoke to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:32). Goldingay comments on these usages: "It suggests a God of universal authority, but of otherwise undefined personal qualities. For a pagan, it would denote only the highest among many gods, but as an epithet of *El* it was accepted in early OT times and applied to Yahweh, so that for a Jew it has monotheistic (or mono-Yahweistic) implications" (Goldingay 1989:72).

Nebuchadnezzar's comment, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego" (3:28) and the same expression in his first decree (v. 29) also supports the idea that the king used the title "the Most High God" in a polytheistic way (SDABC 4:785). For Nebuchadnezzar, the Most High God was only for the Jews because the "God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego" rescued only "his servants." Though he recognized the power of God, he did not inquire about the name or nature of that God (Fewell 1988:56, 57). For him, the God of Israel was still a national deity (Doukhan 2000:55). Although the spectacular power to save pushed the king not only to acknowledge the Hebrews' God, but also to place the Jewish God on a list worthy of toleration and respect, the king never admitted that his own power should be subject to this divine power,

nor did he require people to worship the God of Daniel's friends (Goldingay 1989:75).

However, it is notable that the king seemed to begin to acknowledge the existence of Daniel's God by designating him as the "Most High God." Note also the reason for the king's decree: "No other god can save in this way" (v. 29). In this category, the king included his Babylonian gods. Consequently, not only did Nebuchadnezzar's decree ensure that the miraculous event, demonstrating God's power to deliver his servants, would be known throughout his empire (3:29), but he, himself, moved further along in his understanding of the true God (Shea 1996:114).

White also comments on the missiological impact this event had throughout the entire empire: "The tidings of their wonderful deliverance were carried to many countries by the representatives of the different nations that had been invited by Nebuchadnezzar to the dedication. Through the faithfulness of His children, God was glorified in all the earth" (1917:512).

The Second Dream of Nebuchadnezzar

The narrative in Dan 4 is mainly a type of personal testimony given by Nebuchadnezzar himself. In chaps. 2 and 3, Nebuchadnezzar was impressed and acknowledged the existence of God, but the king still thought of him as only the God of the

Jews and believed that their God was not the only true God, but simply the highest God, the chief of all gods (*SDABC* 4:785). Even in chap. 4, Nebuchadnezzar designated Daniel as “Belteshazzar, after the name of my god” (vs. 8a; cf. 1:7). However, the phrase may be taken to describe the king’s identity as a Marduk worshipper at the time of the dream (Miller 1994:131). The expression “the spirit of the holy gods is in him” (4:8) also should be interpreted from a polytheistic perspective based on the context of vv. 8, 9, and 18, since these texts are located in the narrative before the king was converted.

only for his greatness and power but also for his sovereignty (v. 3). In his praise, by using the terms “eternal” and “from generation to generation” for God’s kingdom, Nebuchadnezzar was comparing God’s rule with a long and brilliant reign of his own, so recently taken from him because of illness (Wood 1973:102). This suggests that the king became a convert to the worship of the Most High (Fewell 1988:63).

*The Sovereignty of God
and His Mercy for
the Oppressed*

God had demonstrated his sovereignty over the kingdoms

Daniel’s example suggests that God cares about the present context of justice in today’s mission fields.

*The King’s Testimony
Concerning the Most High God*

However, after Nebuchadnezzar’s encounter with God at the end of chap. 4, he shows a radical change in his attitude towards God. It appears that the king used the phrase “the Most High God” (4:1, 2) in an absolute sense, as a deity superior to other gods, and even as a personal God, as indicated when he said, “The miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me” (Doukhan 2000:60). Nebuchadnezzar praised Yahweh not

of this world through the king’s dream and Daniel had courageously interpreted it straightforwardly in a cultural setting where it was customary to flatter the sovereign and avoid telling him anything disagreeable or that he did not want to hear (*SDABC* 4:788). In his interpretation, Daniel proclaimed the message of judgment and the sovereignty of God (4:25). In vs. 17, the purpose of the dream was for the living, meaning all living humans to let them know that the Most High is sovereign. In v. 25, the same purpose is speci-

fied for Nebuchadnezzar (Wood 1973:112, 116). God's sovereignty was then confirmed by the voice from heaven (v. 32).

However, Daniel introduced the topic of God's mercy immediately after his message of God's justice (v. 26). Daniel then appealed to the king: "Renounce your sins by doing what is right and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed" (v. 27). The appeal was for the king to repent, confess, and restore because the sovereign God would bring judgment (Shea 1996:75). Daniel's concern for the oppressed was based on his understanding of God's justice. Daniel was aware of the context of the oppressed in Babylon and bravely advised the heathen king to take care of them (Kim 2005:49-54).

Traditionally, the centrality of the cross of Jesus has been stressed as payment for the penalty for sin to satisfy the requirement of the justice of God for eternal life (Carroll and Daniel 2000:529). However, the book of Daniel shows that the justice of God encompasses more than the spiritual dimension and extends into the concrete realities of human social context. Daniel's example suggests that God cares about the present context of justice in today's mission fields. This also suggests that sharing God's care for the people who are in the context of injustice in a society is a part of a contextualized message.

Result of Witness

When the king continued in his pride for another year and then boasted in what he had done to build Babylon, the dream of the tree being cut off for seven years was literally fulfilled. At the end of the seven years, God restored Nebuchadnezzar as predicted, for he humbly recognized the true God (v. 34). Nebuchadnezzar's acknowledgment of the eternal rulership and sovereignty of God was based on his personal experience. When he said, "All people of the earth are regarded as nothing" (v. 35), he apparently included himself, showing the humility that at last characterized him (Wood 1973:125). The phrase "he does as he pleases" (v. 35) also reflects his experience of the imposed insanity (1973). By praising, honoring, and glorifying the Most High God, Nebuchadnezzar showed that he came to realize that the Most High God of Daniel, not the gods of Babylon, was sovereign (Miller 1994:129).

In his concluding remarks, Nebuchadnezzar designated God as "the King of heaven" (v. 37), a phrase that is unique in the Old Testament. It seems that Nebuchadnezzar's reverence to his newly found God forced him to acknowledge the kingship of God instead of having pride in his own kingship (Goldingay 1989:90). By using the three words "praise," "exalt," and "glorify" in his remarks, the king indicated again that God is worthy of such praise because

God's judgment of his pride had been proper (v. 37a). These three verbs are all participles, indicating the king's continual praise of the Lord (Miller 1994:144). He also stated the reason for his praise: He was doing it because everything God does is "right" and "just" (v. 37b). By this expression, the king admitted that God's judgment of his pride had been proper.

Furthermore, it is notable that Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that God restored his kingdom, greater than before, not by political maneuvering or actual fighting, when he repent-

became widely known to "all people, nations, and languages" through the royal witness, was even more important than the king's conversion. God's concern for the oppressed in the king's decree would be a relevant message for the governing class as well as for the lower class that included the captives from Judah.

Missiological Implications

Daniel was careful to contrast and pour new meaning into the terms he used to introduce the true God to his Babylonian audience, even though

Daniel added biblical meaning to the terms he used, just as modern missionaries do.

ed (v. 36). Consequently, it can be concluded that Nebuchadnezzar was rejoicing in salvation that had come to him and had come to know through personal encounter the living God (v. 37). Some scholars such as Calvin, Keil, Pusey, and Archer deny the genuineness of the king's conversion, while others such as Wood, Young, Luck, Rushdoony, and Walvoord believed that the king had a genuine conversion experience (Miller 1994:144). White also acknowledges that the king was converted (White 1917:521).

The knowledge of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion, which

he used titles of local deities. Daniel introduced the idea that God is in heaven but still has power to reveal things on earth (2:28). The Babylonian wise men and Nebuchadnezzar did not conceive of any god having power and ability over heaven and earth (cf. v. 11). The idea that God had sovereignty over matters both in heaven and on earth was totally new to them. Daniel also used terms that the surrounding nations and peoples used in a polytheistic way to represent the Hebrew understanding of God in a monotheistic way. This shows that Daniel effectively communicated

biblical meanings, as did New Testament writers, who used the Greek word *theos* to designate the Hebrew God, in spite of the pagan origin of the word. Daniel added biblical meaning to the terms he used, just as modern missionaries do.

This is very evident in the process of translating the Bible. Translators have had to work hard to find terminology from the receptor's language to designate accurately biblical meanings. Cultural forms (words) usually have to have biblical meanings poured into them to catch the message God wants to convey. For example, missionaries to China adapted the word *Shangti*, which was a word used to designate the monotheistic supreme god of Confucianism to designate the God of the Bible. Missionaries in Korea adapted the word *Hananim*, which was used to designate the One Great Lord of Creation within Korean shamanism (Oak 2001:43, 48, 52-57).

However, the impact of using a local form (word) is not because of its familiar associations. It is because of the new meanings that are added (Hesselgrave 1991:75). The new meaning added to a word begins to produce within a culture a subgroup that assigns new meanings to familiar forms, thereby creating Christian functional substitutes (Malinowski 1945:52). Carlos Martin defines functional substitutes as "culturally appropriate elements which take the place of

rituals or practices which are incompatible with scriptural teaching" (Martin 1997:309). However, there is risk involved when a word (form) is used in a different way by different groups within the same culture. Misunderstandings can arise. The key to communicating biblical meanings is to carefully choose the right local forms (words) and then continue to pour the new biblical meanings into those new verbal symbols, just as Daniel did. In conclusion, when understanding and interpreting Scripture, it is very important to realize that "God's revelation is given to a specific time, place, circumstance, and in a particular language" (Paulien 2004:43). This understanding of the relationship between *missio Dei* and culture is very important for the one who will communicate the Word of God in a cross-cultural context in modern missions.

Daniel's use of local titles for God that were the same or similar with usages in his Near Eastern context suggests the possibility of using local forms, symbols, and words in the course of Bible translation, as well as in cross-cultural ministry. To avoid misunderstanding and in order to communicate the proper meaning when using such new verbal symbols correctly, forms must be carefully chosen and biblical meaning must be poured into them. Biblical teaching (pouring biblical content into local forms) is a safeguard against syncretism.

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