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Missiological Implications of Nebuchadnezzar's Dreams

Introduction

Dreams and visions play an important role in salvation history (cf. Num 12:6; 1 Sam 3:1; 28:6, 15). In the Old Testament, God signified dreams and visions as one means of communicating with the gentiles as well as his people (Gen 20:6; 40:5; 41:1-7; Num 12:6; cf. Gen 28:12; 31:10-11; 37:5, 9; Judg 7:5; 1 Kgs 3:5, 15; Joel 2:28). The New Testament also emphasizes the revelatory nature of dreams and visions. This is especially true of some of the visions in Acts because they marked the advance of the gospel into the gentile world (Acts 9:1-9; 10; 11:1-8; 16:9-10; 26:9-10). This shows that God reveals his divine purpose to save nations through the mediums of dreams and visions.

Although dreams and visions are one of the dominant mediums of *missio Dei* (God's Mission) in the Bible, it is unusual to find Christians who pay much attention to dreams and visions in the Western Christian world today. The subject is not even treated seriously in academic theological circles in spite of being evident in Scripture that God uses supernatural dreams and visions to reach and save unreached people.

There are twenty-six occurrences of dreams and thirty occurrences of visions in the book of Daniel, indicating that the book of Daniel is a major resource for the study of dreams and visions in the Bible. The dreams and visions of the book function as an important means to convey the messages of God to heathen kings as well as to Daniel. One of the most powerful examples of God's mission in the book of Daniel can be found in the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, this paper seeks to investigate the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar in order to draw out their missiological implications.

The Book of Daniel as a Mission Document

Although Israel was to be a blessing to “all peoples on earth” (Gen 12:3; Ps 67), the people largely failed to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6, NIV). Because of her compromise with the idolatrous religions of the very people Israel was to reach, God judged both Israel and Judah with exile in Assyria and Babylon. However, Walter C. Kaiser explains another significant reason for the exile: “Yahweh must send his people into exile in order for them to act in accordance with his desire that the nation of Israel should be his agents whereby he could bless all the families of the earth” (2000:13). Kaiser suggests that the exile forced the Jews into a missional situation.

Johannes Blauw proposes that the apocalyptic literature, particularly the book of Daniel, which gives insight into the secrets of a universal future, motivated not only Jewish missionary consciousness in the Diaspora, but also impacted the New Testament church (1974:60). Robert H. Glover suggests the same theme: “He [Daniel] and his fellow Jews of the captivity and later Dispersion were theistic missionaries among the peoples of the East, as well as of southern Europe and northern Africa, right to the time of Christ” (1946:21). Thus, J. Herbert Kane suggests that “it was during this period that Israel’s missionary role completely changed and became centrifugal” (1976:30).

The book of Daniel gives an excellent example of witness in exile. Daniel served God as a cross-cultural missionary in a heathen kingdom, Neo-Babylon. Even in tragedy, God brought his servants, Daniel and his friends, into circumstances where they were able to witness in a way that extended far beyond their little family circle in Judah (Shea 1996:35). They seemed to understand why they were in exile and what they needed to do there to achieve God’s plan. Because of its missional perspectives, the subject of God’s sovereignty in saving the nations is especially dominant in the book of Daniel.

Identity of the Dream Giver

The reason why God communicated with the heathen king Nebuchadnezzar through dreams is because dreams were prevalent throughout antiquity (Kelsey 1973:45-48). In the Ancient Near East, the dreams experienced by kings were considered a royal privilege (Oppenheim 1956:188) and the customary way in which the divine world communicated with human beings (Goldingay 1989:52). People often slept near a holy place in the hope of receiving dreams from their gods (Pfandl 2004:22). Thus, Gerhard Pfandl also points out that “possibly, because of the Babylonian

preoccupation with dreams, God chose this means to communicate with Nebuchadnezzar" (2004:22).

In chapters 2 and 4 of Daniel, God uses dreams to reveal his identity to the heathen king with a salvific purpose.

Daniel 2

It was God who revealed his will to the heathen king Nebuchadnezzar through dreams to show his purpose for all people. After dreaming, Nebuchadnezzar's mind was troubled and he could not sleep because he remembered the fact that he had dreamed, but could not remember the content (2:1, 3). John F. Walvoord explains this as part of God's intervention just as in the case of Ahasuerus' sleeplessness (Esth 6; 1971:47). The use of plural "dreams" also parallels Pharaoh's dreams. Just as Pharaoh's two dreams were given to stress that "the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon" (Gen 41:32), so God impressed Nebuchadnezzar with the dreams to show his sovereignty. Some scholars believe that the use of the plural "dreams" (2:1) indicates a state of dreaming rather than several dreams (Miller 1994:77; Montgomery 1927:142; Young 1949:56). However, that argument does not answer the question as to why the king used the singular form in chapter 4.

In Daniel 2:29, Daniel also pointed out that the reason why God gave the king dreams was because the king's mind had turned "to things to come" before he dreamed. This suggests that God had revealed the dream to satisfy Nebuchadnezzar's desire to know the future (Miller 1994:90). Concerning the king's desire to know the future, Zdravko Stefanovic gives some hints focused on Daniel 2:1, which says the dreams were given in the second year of his reign (2007:80). Nebuchadnezzar's long reign is usually divided in two parts: the first part as Nebuchadnezzar the Destroyer, and the second part as Nebuchadnezzar the Builder. The first years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign were characterized by extensive military campaigns. However, heavy taxes as well as other forms of subjugation were causing rebellions throughout the empire. In response to this uncertainty, the king desired to know his future and God gave him dreams about the future of the world.

In fact, in several places, Daniel designates God as a dream giver. In 2:19 he says, "the secret was revealed to Daniel in a night vision" and in 2:28-29, God reveals mysteries and is called "the revealer of mysteries." This means that Nebuchadnezzar's dreams as well as Daniel's interpretation were a result obtained by direct revelation from God (Lucas 2002:72). Thus, James Montgomery calls the statement, "there is a God in heaven," who is the dream giver and revealer of secrets, as "the supreme theme of the book" and "the cardinal principle of the book" (1927:162).

The dramatic story of Daniel 2 climaxes in the king's praise to God and his falling prostrate before Daniel (v. 46) and also in the promotion of Daniel and his friends to high positions in the court (v. 48). This recalls a passage from Isaiah which speaks of God's sovereignty (Seow 2003:35):

Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I will lift My hand in an oath to the nations, And set up My standard for the peoples; They shall bring your sons in their arms, And your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders; Kings shall be your foster fathers, And their queens your nursing mothers; *They shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, And lick up the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD, For they shall not be ashamed who wait for Me*". (Isa 49:22, 23, NIV; emphasis supplied)

The last section of Isaiah's prediction shows a glimpse of God's purpose for all people which seems to be achieved in the story of Daniel and his three friends. God gives dreams even to a heathen king to reveal his sovereignty and show his purpose for the future.

Daniel 4

The narrative in Daniel 4 is mainly a type of personal testimony given by Nebuchadnezzar himself. In this occasion, the king remembered the contents of the dream, but was frightened because of the unexpected falling of the tree in his second dream, much like his fear because of the sudden destruction of the statue in his first dream (Stefanovic 2007:153). He designated God as "the Most High God" (cf. 3:26) who has performed miraculous signs and wonders for him (v. 2). However, it was Daniel who revealed the identity of the dream giver. The dream contained a decree that the Most High had issued (vv. 24, 25). The holy messengers had come down from heaven to give the king a dream (vv. 13, 17) that was derived ultimately from God. Furthermore, Daniel's interpretation also was a direct witness about God which introduced God as a dream giver to the heathen king (see Kim 2005:222-224).

Surprisingly, Nebuchadnezzar testified not only concerning the identity of the dream giver but also about his personal encounter with the Most High God in the judgmental scene (vv. 31-32). In the testimony of the king, "a voice" which he heard from heaven (v. 31) reveals God's will (Stefanovic 2007:167). After the king was restored, as a sign of recognition to the voice as God's, the king blessed the most High and praised, exalted, and honored the King of Heaven. He concludes that God is able to humble those who walk in pride (vv. 34-37).

It is notable that in the story of Nebuchadnezzar, God is presented as a dream giver to communicate his salvific message in the context of judg-

ment as given through the heathen king's personal testimony.

Purpose of Dreams

The story of Nebuchadnezzar shows that God gives dreams even to heathen kings if they contribute to his purpose. The purpose is disclosed in the process of interpretation of the dreams.

Declaration of God's Sovereignty and His Kingdom

God had demonstrated his sovereignty over the kingdoms 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 (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 1953-57:4:788). Although some scholars persist that the king "had forgotten the details of the dreams that had been haunting him" (Baldwin 1978:87), careful consideration of details in chapter 2 leads to the conclusion that "although the king's mind was deeply impressed, he found it impossible, when he awoke, to recall the particulars of the dream" (Collins 1993:156).

The question is why Nebuchadnezzar resorted to asking the wise men to tell him both the dream and its meaning. It seems it was God's providence to let the king forget the detailed content of the dreams for the sake of *missio Dei*. As a matter of fact, in the ancient world, it was believed that if a person forgot his dreams, it meant that his god was angry with him (Oppenheim 1956:237). The kingdom of Babylon was a society where dreams were regarded as both sacred and meaningful. Thus, to cross this cultural gulf, God had to use dreams sensitively and creatively as a medium to communicate the knowledge of the true God.

To the request of Nebuchadnezzar to tell him the content of the dream and its interpretation (2:2, 3), the wise men answered that no one could do such a thing except the gods, who do not live among men (v. 11). In fact, the function of the wise men's ritual at the palace was both explanatory and therapeutic (Collins 1993:156). They commonly used dream books to explain the symbols and the meaning of dreams and treat dream-related problems. As experts, they also were supposed to conduct appropriate rituals to do away with the evil powers that were behind the dreams (Oppenheim 1956:219). The confession of their impotence concerning knowledge of the dream content shows that they considered communication with the higher world impossible (Stefanovic 2007:88).

Daniel also agreed with the honest confession of the wise men by pointing out that "there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (vv. 27-28). Daniel's answer clearly indicates that the purpose of the dreams

was to reveal to Nebuchadnezzar God's sovereignty for the world and the coming of the ultimate kingdom of God. It is important to notice that Daniel begins and ends his speech before the heathen king by referring to his God. Just as Joseph did in the court of Pharaoh (Gen 41:16, 25), Daniel also readily admits that only God knows the future and can reveal it (2007:88).

Even some Jewish authors persist that "a dream comes when there are many cares" (Eccl 5:3) and "a man is only shown in a dream what emanates from the thoughts of his heart" (The Babylonian Talmud, *Bera-kot*, 55b). However, saying that Nebuchadnezzar's dream came as God's answer to the king's desire to know what would happen in days to come, Daniel builds a strong missiological bridge between God in heaven and Nebuchadnezzar.

Acknowledgement of God's Sovereignty

In chapter 4, after giving the interpretation of another dream that Nebuchadnezzar had, Daniel again revealed that the purpose of the dream was to bring Nebuchadnezzar to the point where he would "acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (v. 25). The verb "acknowledge" (*y'da'*, to know) is one of the key terms that regulates the covenant relationship between God and human beings. The same usage is found in the Exodus narrative to show that God's ultimate purpose was to lead the Egyptians to the knowledge of him who is the only God who rules the world (Exod 7:5, 17; 8:10; 9:29). This shows that the purpose of the king's second dream also was salvific rather than judgmental.

The verdict of the observers also declare a similar purpose: "The holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men" (v. 17). The expression, "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" has been called "one of the immortal sentences of the Hebrew Scriptures" because of its strong emphasis on God's sovereignty (Montgomery 1927:236). Together with the message of God's sovereignty, the verdict in the king's dream was for "the living," that is, all human beings, which means that "God's dealings with Babylon and its king were to be an illustration to other nations and their kings of the results of accepting or rejecting the divine plan" (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* 1953-57:4:790).

The verdict of the second dream was also for the king himself. First of all, the king expressed that the second dream was performed for him by the Most High God (v. 2). The expression, "for me," implies his direct and personal encounter with God (Stefanovic 2007:152). Furthermore,

although the verdict predicted a calamity because of the king's pride, a second chance was offered if he might repent (v. 26). This shows that the humbling experiences were not meant to destroy the king but to help him recognize the sovereignty of God. "It is significant that the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar will be returned only when he realizes that he does not really have a kingdom" (Smith-Christopher 1996:75). After the seven years of calamity and after the king had repented and acknowledged the sovereignty of God (4:34), God's purpose was achieved. Now, it seems evident that Nebuchadnezzar accepted God as the Most High God in an absolute sense as well as a dream giver.

From the above discussion, it is clear that Nebuchadnezzar's dreams were salvific means used by God to bring the king and the people of his nation to recognize and praise the sovereign God.

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Means of Mission

Some Western Christians treat dreams as merely psychological phenomena, feeling "dream revelation would seem to be unnecessary in light of the fact that both the Old and New Testament records have now been completed" (Miller 1994:71). Another problem is that too often missionaries treat those who claim to have encountered supernatural beings through the medium of visions or dreams as having active imaginations or as dabbling in the demonic (Love 2000:292).

Providentially, dreams and visions are drawing attention in modern missionary circles because they have become a major means for conversion in Islamic and animistic areas (Bulkelly 1999:15-22). For example, according to a report in 2007 on the motivations of converts from Islam to Christianity between 1991-2001 27 percent of the converts said that dreams and visions were a major factor in their conversion. Even more interesting was the fact that 40 percent of them testified that they had seen a dream or a vision before their conversion, while 45 percent had had one after their conversion (Woodberry, Shubine, and Marks 2007). I believe that God communicates to Muslims through dreams and visions because they are living in cultures and worldviews where dreams and visions are considered as very important aspects of religious life.

Thus, it is notable that God used dreams in the book of Daniel as a way to communicate in the heathen kingdom of Babylon his salvific message. The examples in the Book of Daniel present strong support for the idea that God can use dreams and visions to draw non-Christians into a saving relationship with him even today.

Richard Love proposes some missiological implications for dreams and visions in the modern mission field: (1) dreams and visions are bibli-

cal and play an important part in life for people in the Two-Thirds World; (2) God speaks through dreams and visions to convert sinners even today; (3) because many of the unreached are beyond the reach of the gospel and because much of the world is illiterate, dreams and visions may still serve to move people along in their understanding of who God is (2000:291, 292).

Biblical Based Interpretations of Dreams

Before too strongly affirming the need for dreams and visions in God's mission, it is important to remember that "the Bible is the exclusive medium of special revelation, whereas dreams and visions are at best only supplementary and secondary" (Love 2000:291, 292). The reason why God gives an interpretation of a dream indicates that the interpretation is regarded as important as the dream itself (Everts 1992:231). This is because dreams are not always divinely inspired.

Thus, new converts in an area where the influence of dreams is dominant must learn to examine their dreams and visions in the light of Scripture (Deut 13:1-5). Those who experience dreams and visions also need to submit their dreams and visions to the leaders of their churches to have them help determine if God is speaking. However, the authority of the interpreter should also be tested by the biblical message (cf. Isa 8:20). The most important aspect in this matter of visions and dreams is that the message conveyed through a vision or dream must always be in harmony with the message of the Bible. The church, as a corporate body, also has a role to play in the interpretation of dreams and visions, testing them against God's Word.

Importance of the Dream Interpreter

In the first story in chapter 2, God gave dreams to Nebuchadnezzar, but the next morning he could not even remember the content of the dreams. The wise men of the Babylonian court acknowledged their limitation, but God prepared an interpreter for the king. Through Daniel's courageous intervention, the king was willing to grant a delay in the execution of the wise men, whereas he was unwilling to do that for the wise men in response to their request for information about the dream.

The issue here is not the interpretation of the king's dreams, but its content, which is unusual. The king's mystery could be ascertained only through divine revelation, and Daniel affirms this (2:28) and so does Nebuchadnezzar (v. 47; Towner 1984:32). It is noticeable that the supernatural solution to the supernatural problem came to Daniel through a night vision (v. 22). This is a good example showing that biblical revelation is a result of divine initiative, not of human initiation or manipulation

(Stefahnovic 2007:94). In the heathen court, Daniel acknowledged that the interpretation came from God who "reveals mysteries" (v. 28) and who is called "the revealer of mysteries" (v. 29). Other biblical prophets also claimed this kind of insight (1 Kgs 22:19-23; Jer 23:18; Amos 3:7), which was given in response to prayer (Hab 2:1-3; 2007:91).

In chapter 4, the king remembered the content of the dream, but the wise men again failed to reveal its meaning. The failure of the other wise men once again heightened the challenge to Daniel, who already had a reputation because of his special divine gift (v. 8; Goldingay 1989:91). Daniel received another opportunity to witness to the fact that his ability to explain the meaning of dreams came from divine revelation. Interestingly, in this chapter more frequently than in any other in this book, Daniel is referred to by his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar (cf. Dan 1:7; 2:26; 4:8, 9, 18, 19; 5:12; 10:1). Perhaps this is so because the story was not only intended to be proclaimed throughout the Babylonian Empire, but also to give the story more authenticity (Stefahnovic 2007:163).

In chapter 4 the issue was the opposite of the previous occasion. The focus was not on the content of the king's dream, but its interpretation. There is a possibility that even if the wise men knew the meaning of the dream, they were afraid to voice it because of the dream's contents. Finally, cornered, Nebuchadnezzar now had no choice but to hear the Hebrew prophet's interpretation (v. 8). Once again, an unexpected truth hits him, a disturbing truth with a divine origin. Ironically, Daniel, who was named after the god Marduk (Bel), was able to help the king, while the wise men who served that god were unable to help the king who was a Marduk worshipper (2007:154, 164).

The role of Daniel, chief of the magician in Babylon, seems now to be well established and the king is confident that Daniel can resolve the mystery (4:9). Even Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that Daniel's insight is the result of his close relationship with his God (vv. 9, 18). Yet, at the same time Nebuchadnezzar is doing his best to show his respect to his own god through relating to Daniel's Babylonian name, Belteshazzar (v. 8). This gives a hint that at the moment of his dreaming and in the process of its interpretation, "Nebuchadnezzar appears to lack understanding about where the source of Daniel's great wisdom is to be found" (Smith-Christopher 1996:75).

When God reveals the meaning, the content of the dream makes Daniel perplexed and even afraid (v. 19). In ancient times, the role of messengers who deliver bad news was dangerous and they often paid for it as if they were responsible for it. Because of this, it seems that "the king reassures Daniel that he is not to fear for his fate" (Goldingay 1989:94).

Daniel responds to the king by saying that he wishes the dream ap-

plied to the king's enemies (v. 19). These words resemble those used by Assyrian and Babylonian dream interpreters when they performed their sacred rituals to dispel the evil effects of dreams (Stefahnovic 2007:162). The content here, however, portrays Daniel's function more like a Hebrew prophet (who proposes ethical means of averting divine judgments) than like a Babylonian exorcist (Collins 1993:229). At last, Daniel repeats the king's dream in a summary fashion and proceeds to tell its meaning, concluding it with a strong appeal to repent.

The dream story of Nebuchadnezzar shows that before God gives a dream, he prepares an interpreter (cf. Gen 41:1-8). Without Daniel, no one in the court would have been able to recognize the content and understand God's message contained in the dream. The book of Daniel shows clearly that the role of the interpreter is just as important as the content and interpretation of a dream.

It is also interesting to note that the role of dream interpreters is prominent in Islamic, Shamanistic, and even Buddhist societies. Although many people who dream have some common understanding as to the contents of their dreams, most of them end up going to a dream interpreter to find out the exact spiritual meaning of their dreams. In such contexts, missionaries could and should function as dream interpreters. If they are reluctant to fill this role the people will visit local interpreters just as King Nebuchadnezzar did when he asked the wise men to explain the content and meaning of his dreams.

Guidelines for Dream Interpretation

The book of Daniel suggests four characteristics of dreams that come from God (Kim 2005:128-129). First, in the book of Daniel, either the person receiving the dream or the interpreter prepared by God to explain the dream emphasized the importance of the content to them. To Daniel, as interpreter of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, "the content of the message received from God" seems to be the "real object of attention" (Rice 2000:622).

Second, Daniel's dreams and visions usually involved an encounter with a supernatural being when communication took place. This aspect of a personal encounter with a supernatural being can distinguish such dreams from common, or self reflective dreams.

Third, those who receive dreams or visions usually are unable to interpret them by themselves. God often provides an interpreter, although sometimes there can be a delay until God sends someone. The role of an interpreter is often as essential as the content of the dreams. It is interesting to note that in the Muslim world God often prepares people with a dream or vision that they only understand many years later.

Finally, those who received dreams and visions often cannot under-

stand what they saw. Thus, an attitude of humility and a realization that only God can give the interpretation of dreams should be a top priority for those who are engaged in cross-cultural ministry in areas of the world where dreams are important (Rice 2000:28).

Conclusion

This article dealt with two dreams of Nebuchadnezzar that were used by God for cross-cultural communication to achieve God's purpose for all people. God used dreams to convey his messages and fulfill his purpose to save nations in the Bible. The story of Nebuchadnezzar especially shows that God uses dreams to reveal his sovereignty, his judgment, and his control of world history even to a heathen king. Through this research, it is clear in the Bible that dreams are often used as a means God uses to communicate with people who do not know him.

Thus, the Christian witness needs to encourage and show an interest in dreams where people in the dream dominant society experience. God's people can also be used by God to introduce those who have dreams to experience a Christian interpretation. It is true that the most important aspect in this matter of dreams is that the message conveyed through a dream must always be in harmony with the message of the Bible. The church, as a corporate body also has a role to play in the interpretation of dreams and visions, testing them against God's Word. To do this more effectively, Christian interpreters need to be trained in the biblical perspectives of dream interpretation. This is especially important in areas where the influence of dreams is dominant.

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