

Clay in Nebuchadnezzar's Dream and the Genesis Creation Accounts

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In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar receives a dream from God wherein he sees an image mostly composed of metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron, but whose feet are partly of iron and partly of clay (Dan 2:31-33). In Daniel's interpretation the metals are said to represent four different kingdoms with the feet representing a divided kingdom (Dan 2:36-43). In this study the concept of clay in Dan 2:41-43 is analyzed in the context of creation.

A number of exegetical techniques are employed in this article. First, a translation of Dan 2:41-43 into English is presented. Following this is an examination of the parallels, both linguistic and thematic, between this passage and Gen 1 and 2. Next, the concepts of clay and the potter are studied as they appear in the Aramaic of Dan 2:41-43, in the Hebrew of the rest of the Old Testament, and finally, in the mythologies of cultures surrounding ancient Israel. Finally, there is an analysis of the idea of the seed of humanity (Dan 2:43), as it relates to creation. It should, then, be noted here that this study is concerned solely with exegesis and textual analysis. As a result, no attempt is made to determine exactly which powers or institutions might be described in Dan 2:41-43. The author of this study assumes, though, that the literature of Dan 2 is genuinely prophetic, having its ultimate origin with a God who knows the future and makes it known to His servants.

Textual Parallels

Translation. In order to understand the meaning of the clay in Dan 2:41-43, it is necessary to consider a translation of the passage. Below is a fairly literal translation of Dan 2:41-43. It should be noted that the term translated “miry clay” literally reads, in the Aramaic, “clay of miry clay.”

41. And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay, and partly of iron, a divided kingdom it shall be, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, as you saw the iron mixed with the miry clay.

42. And as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of clay, so part of the kingdom shall be strong, and part of it shall be brittle.

43. And as you saw the iron mixed with the miry clay, they shall be mixed with the seed of humanity, but they shall not cleave, this and that, just as iron does not mix with clay.

Parallels with Genesis 1 and 2. A number of parallels between Dan 2:41-43 and Gen 1 and 2 may now be examined. First, the strong linguistic parallels are presented, and after that, the thematic connections. It should be understood, though, that since these passages are written in two different, though similar, languages, not as many direct verbal parallels may appear as when two passages in the same language are compared.

The first linguistic parallel is the word for “image,” *šelem* in both Aramaic and Hebrew. This word actually appears in Dan 2:32, slightly outside the passage of consideration here, but the clay was part of the feet of this statue described as a whole as a *šelem*. In Gen 1:26, 27, it is said that humankind would be formed after God’s image. The second linguistic connection between these passages is the word for “cleave,” *dbq*, (*d’baq* in Aramaic, and *dābaq* as the Hebrew cognate form) (Dan 2:43, Gen 2:24). In Dan 2:43 the two types of people are said to not cleave one with each other, and in Gen 2:24, a man would cleave to his wife. It is significant that even two linguistic parallels still exist between passages written in different languages.

A number of thematic parallels also exist between Dan 2:41-43 and Gen 1 and 2. First, both passages refer to the work of a potter. Daniel 2:41 says that the feet of the image were partly of potter’s clay, and Gen 2:7 says that God formed Adam from the dust of the ground. The word for “form” in Gen 2:7, *yāšar*, is often used in Hebrew for the work of a potter. The noun form of this word, *yôšēr*, for example, refers to a potter

in Ps 2:9 and Jer 18:1-6, a concept explored more deeply later in this study. One may next consider the relationship between dust, *‘āpār*, (Gen 2:7) and clay in Hebrew thinking. In Job 10:9 Job says that he was made from clay and did not wish to return to *‘āpār*. Clay, *ḥomer*, is, here, paralleled with *‘āpār*, used to discuss hardened clay.¹ Finally, both passages refer to humankind. Gen 2:7 discusses the formation of one human, and Dan 2:43 mentions the “seed of humanity.”

Clay in the Ancient Near East

After noting the parallels between Dan 2:41-43 and Gen 1 and 2, especially with reference to the ideas of a potter and clay, we may now study how clay was understood and used in the ancient Near East. This section considers the words used for “clay” and “potter” in Dan 2:41-43, the equivalent words for those terms in Hebrew, and myths involving clay in the ancient Near East. First, though, a few general remarks on clay in that time and place must be considered. In the ancient Near East, clay was mainly composed of hydrated silicate of alumina, with the chemical formula, $Al^2O^3 \cdot 2SiO^2, 2H^2O$. This compound would be mixed with impurities. At times the impurities would compose up to half the volume of the clay.²

Clay could be referred to in the native, wet form or in a worked form, as in pottery. Some clay was used in sun-dried and kiln-fired brick. Clay could also be used to cover roofs or floor surfaces. A potter made dishes, toys, idols, or cult objects. Clay could also be a writing material. Ownership seals would often be stamped on wet clay. The clay of Dan 2 was most likely terra cotta, which was found in pottery.³

Pottery and Clay in Aramaic. One can gain additional insight from a study of the meanings of the words for “clay” and “potter,” as they appear in the Aramaic of this passage. The following paragraphs analyze first, *peḥār*, the word for “potter,” in Dan 2:41, and next, *ḥāsap*, and *ṭīn*, the words for clay in this passage.

Peḥār. *Peḥār* is understood to refer to a potter in Dan 2:41. The Syriac cognate, *paḥḥārāyā*, and the Neosyriac cognate, *paḥḥārā*, refer also to a potter. The Arabic form, *faḥḥār*, can refer either to pottery or a

¹ Roland K. Harrison, “Clay,” International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 1:717.

² J. L. Kelso, “Pottery,” *IDB* (1962), 3:849.

³ J. L. Kelso, “Clay,” *IDB* (1962), 1:641.

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potter. The Ugaritic form, *pḥr*, means “potter.” This Aramaic term is a loan word from Akkadian, whose form, *paḥāru*, means “potter.”⁴

Ḥāsap. *Ḥāsap* refers to clay, earthenware, pottery, or a pot. This word has Syriac cognate forms *ḥeṣpā*, *ḥezbā*, and *ḥeṣbā*. In Yemenite the cognate form *ḥaṣaf* refers to thick clay. In Ethiopian *ṣāḥ^eb* refers to earthenware or a vessel. This is a loan word from Akkadian, whose cognate form, *ḥaṣbu*, refers to potter’s clay or sherd. The term refers to molded clay in Aramaic.⁵

One may, then, consider the repetition of concepts in the phrase, *ḥāsap dī-peḥār*, literally rendered, “potter’s clay of the potter,” with reference to one of the materials of which the feet and toes of the image were composed, according to Dan 2:41. *Ḥāsap*, which refers to potter’s clay, is used in conjunction with *peḥār*, which refers to a potter. One may also note the alliteration in the two words, as both contain a *ḥêt* and a *pê*. Clearly the author wished to emphasize that this was not simply any clay, but, specifically and importantly, potter’s clay.

Tîn. The word *tîn* is understood to refer to a type of miry clay in Dan 2:41-43. This word in its verbal form means “to besmear with” in Syriac and Neo-Aramaic. The cognate equivalent of the noun form of *tîn* is *tîn* in those same languages. The Arabic cognate, *fîn*, means “to daub or coat with clay.”⁶ In addition, the Assyrian cognate, *tîtu*, is known to have referred to the mire that exists after a flood.⁷

The Hebrew cognate, *tîṭ*, may be studied in depth at this point. This word refers to mud, mire, or clay. One may examine Mic 7:10, 2 Sam 22:43, and Zech 9:3; 10:5 for examples. The dungeon into which Jeremiah was cast contained *tîṭ* (Jer 38:6), the mire in which the prophet sank. This soft mire was also the lair of Leviathan, as recorded in Job 41:22 (41:30 in English). Isa 57:20 describes this material as being cast off by the sea. This word may also refer to potter’s clay, as in Isa 41:25, or brick clay, as in Nah 3:14.⁸ However the clay would be used, the term *tîṭ* refers to natural, wet clay that has not yet been worked by a potter or

⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 5 (2000), s.v. “Pechar.”

⁵ Koehler and Baumgartner, s.v. “Hasap.”

⁶ Koehler and Baumgartner, s.v. “Tin.”

⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1999), s.v. “Tit.”

⁸ *Ibid.*

brick maker.⁹ The Aramaic determined form, as seen in Dan 2:41-43, then, refers to wet clay which has not yet been worked by a potter.

It may be noted here that the only instances where *ṭīn* is used to refer to clay in Dan 2:41-43 are also where it is said that the clay is mixed with the iron. When *ṭīn* is not used, in Dan 2:43c, it is said that iron cannot mix with clay. This would suggest that the clay was molded onto the iron when the clay was still soft. When the clay hardened to appear more like pottery, it ceased to bond as effectively.

Pottery and Clay in Hebrew. The Hebrew language had a number of words, other than *ṭīl*, to describe clay. While *ṭīl* referred to wet clay, dry clay was referred to as *ʿāpār*, or dust, as noted above. In Gen 2:19, *ʾādāmā*, “ground,” is the term for clay used to describe the material from which the animals were crafted.¹⁰

The general term for any worked clay was *ḥomer*. This, in fact, is the word translated “clay” in Job 10:9 from which Job said the man was made. Other texts that use this word are Job 33:6, Isa 29:16; 41:25, etc.¹¹

This theme of God as the potter and humanity as the clay is continued in symbolic language elsewhere in the Old Testament. In Isa 29:16 people are compared to a clay pot that says its potter did not make it and he had no understanding. These people can be associated with Israel, as David is said to have dwelt in their location (Isa 29:1, 2). In Isa 45:9, clay disputing with the potter is the metaphor for a rebellious people. According to vs. 11, the people, again, are Israel, whose Maker is the Holy One of Israel. In Isa 64:8 it is said that God is the potter and His people are the clay.

Then one can consider Jer 18:1-6. In this passage the prophet visits a potter who is forming a pot that appears misshapen. The potter re-forms the clay into a properly designed pot. God then says that He can do the same thing for Israel.¹² One can see here how the concept of God as potter in creation of the humanity in the beginning was applied to God’s forming of His people. That which is physically molded like clay may also be spiritually molded like clay.

Pottery and Clay in Ancient Near-Eastern Mythologies. It is clear that there was seen a strong connection between clay and creation in Is-

⁹ Kelso, “Pottery.”

¹⁰ Harrison, 717.

¹¹ Ibid., 718.

¹² Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Daniel* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000),

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rael. A similar connection existed in Babylon. In one Babylonian myth, referred to as “When Anu Had Created the Heavens,” the goddess Mami, at the behest of Enki and other gods, made humankind out of clay mixed with the blood of a slain god. This myth dates back to the first Babylonian dynasty.¹³ In this myth, humanity was created to fear the gods and carry the yoke. Humanity, being a mixture of clay and a god’s blood, would be joined with the divine.¹⁴

Another myth, dating back to 800 B.C.E., is described on a tablet at Ashur. The names of the first two human beings formed are written with the deity superscript.¹⁵ The gods were to make mankind spring up like grain from the ground.¹⁶ In “The Creation of the World by Marduk,” Marduk is said to have taken dirt and created humanity.¹⁷ While clay is not directly mentioned in these myths, the ideas of springing up a human being from the ground and shaping humanity from dirt draws one to consider the clay common to this type of myth. Instead of having humankind formed from nothing or a material such as water or molten metal, both Israelite and Babylonian accounts say the human species was made from earth.

The Seed of Humanity

Daniel 2:43 makes a cryptic reference to the “seed of humanity.” As noted above, humankind, and all its seed, was originally formed from clay in the creation story. One must, then, study the idea of the seed of humanity to more deeply understand the parallels between Dan 2:41-43 and Gen 1 and 2.

Word Study of ʾēnāš. First, one must conduct a brief word study of ʾēnāš, the word for man/humanity in Dan 2:43. This word refers to humankind, the human race, people, a man, or a certain person. In Dan 4:13 the term refers to humankind, whose unique type of mind would be replaced in the king by the heart of a beast. Ezra 4:11 uses the term to refer to people of a certain country, people across the river. The term “seed of humanity,” which occurs in Dan 2:43, finds a cognate equivalent, “zēr amēlūti,” in Akkadian.¹⁸

¹³ Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1963), 66.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62, 63.

¹⁸ See Koehler and Baumgartner, s.v. “Enash.”

Additional information about this word can be gained by analyzing the Hebrew cognate, *ʿenôš*. Its verbal root, *ʾnš*, refers to being weak or sick. One can consider the related form *ʾānūš*, which occurs in Job 34:6 and Isa 17:11, and *ʾānūšā*, which is found in Mic 1:9, for example. In each case, the word refers to a wound or weakness. The Akkadian word, *enēšū*, refers also to being weak or sick.¹⁹

One can note also that *ʿenāš*, in Aramaic, can be used as an equivalent for *ʾādām*, humankind/Adam, in the Hebrew of Gen 1:26, 27; 2:7; etc. In the Aramaic of Dan 7:13, the term *bar ʿenāš*, is used for “son of man/humanity.” The plural form, *b^enēy ʿānāšā*, “sons of humanity,” appears in Dan 2:38. Then, in Dan 8:17, “son of man/humanity,” is stated with the Hebrew equivalent, *ben ʾādām*. In Dan 10:16, the plural term, *b^enēy ʾādām*, is used to refer to the “sons of humanity.”

Clay and the Seed of Humanity. One may next study the significance of the connection between *ʿenāš* and weakness and how such a connection associates the clay with the seed of humanity. Verse 41 says that the strength of the iron would be in the feet and toes. Verse 42 says that the toes would be partly strong and partly brittle. Assuming, based on vs. 40, 41, that the iron is the strength, the clay would be the weakness. If *ʿenāš* also carries the connotation of weakness, the weak clay would be easily associated with the seed of men. Then, one may consider the contrasting expression, *zera^c hamm^elūkā*, “seed of royalty,” as appears in Dan 1:3. These individuals, according to vs. 3, 4, were associated with nobility and those with exceptional physical and intellectual attributes. The *z^era^c ʿānāšā* “seed of humanity” would, then, be seen as the opposite, simple non-royals who are mysteriously joined with the *malkū*, “kingdom,” of iron.

Finally, one may consider the literary parallelism used with reference to iron, clay, and the seed of humanity in Dan 2:43. It is noted first that iron is mixed with clay, and, next, that “they” shall be mixed with the seed of humanity. Iron would parallel “they,” and clay would parallel “the seed of humanity.” This would mean that “they” is the iron, and “the seed of humanity” is the clay. One may observe the following diagram.

- A. Iron mixed with
- B. Clay.
- A. They, mixed with.
- B. The seed of humanity.

¹⁹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, s.v. “Anash.”

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Clay and humanity are associated in Dan 2:41-43, just as they are in Gen 1 and 2. This strengthens the parallel between the two passages.

Zera^c in Creation. The cognate of *zera^c*, “seed,” also appears in the immediate context of the creation story. The first occurrence is in Gen 1:11, 12 regarding the creation of plants. Then, after the fall of humanity, in Gen 3:15, it is said that there would be hatred between the serpent’s *zera^c* and the woman’s *zera^c*.

Summary and Conclusion

As is shown above, a number of parallels exist between Dan 2:41-43 and the creation account of Gen 1 and 2. Most significant is the concept of the potter and the clay. Not only did the Hebrews associate creation with a potter forming clay, but a number of ancient Near Eastern mythologies also made such a connection. A relationship between the clay and the seed of humanity in Dan 2:41-43 further strengthens this parallel as clay, humanity, and seed are all associated in the creation story.

There is much need, then, for further research into this topic, especially concerning the issue of how this parallel fits in the application of Daniel 2 with history. Might a power that finds its origin with the creating work of God become involved with the fourth, iron kingdom? How would such a power behave? Would such a power be thought of as part of a counterfeit creation? What does it mean that the clay does not cleave to the iron? Is such a creation ultimately unsuccessful? One might also ponder the personal applications of this parallel? Should anyone who considers himself/herself to be a creation of God be found involved with the strong and idolatrous practices of the world? Thus, a considerable amount of research must still be conducted regarding this topic.

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