

Nebuchadnezzar's Deficits in Daniel 4:27 and His Response to Divine Promptings

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Humans generally find it easier to point out other people's errors than to name their own. Criticizing others is an exercise in futility with this exception: it is possible to learn from the mistakes of others if we study from cause to effect and learn in our own lives the lessons taught by the errors of others, and the consequences resulting from those errors. It is with this exceptional aim in view that we shall contemplate the moral deficits of a man who lived in antiquity, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (605-562 BC).

Our discussion of Nebuchadnezzar's faults is not for the purpose of a postmortem conviction and condemnation of the irascible potentate—no matter how deserving of execration some might believe him to be. This discussion intends to accomplish three things:

- to better understand God's character as seen in His dealings with Nebuchadnezzar
- to demonstrate the importance and value of receiving and submitting to God's warnings and counsels
- to enable and encourage the interested reader to escape such consequences as Nebuchadnezzar experienced

We begin by raising a few questions:

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- What crimes did Nebuchadnezzar commit that merited the drastic punishment of seven literal years of exile from human habitations—feeding on grass and living in the fields with the animals (Dan 4:23, 25)?¹
- What code of laws can one use to measure Nebuchadnezzar’s moral integrity, or lack thereof?²
- What does Daniel mean when he speaks to Nebuchadnezzar of “your sins” and “your iniquities”? (Dan 4:27).

These and other questions will guide our discussion on Nebuchadnezzar’s morality in light of his fate.

Nebuchadnezzar, the Servant of the Most High God

Many scholars focus exclusively on Nebuchadnezzar’s devastations in Judah (2 Kgs 24:10-16; 25:1-21; Jer 39:10), the setting up and worship of his golden image (Dan 3), or his pride in the beauty and impregnability of Babylon (Dan 4:30), as deserving of punishment. There is no complete record of Nebuchadnezzar’s sins and iniquities, although Dan 4:27 suggests that he had some moral problems. It is well to consider that the casual reader of the book of Daniel may fail to discern between those actions which Yahweh approved, and those He considered deserving of the greatest condemnation.

It seems Nebuchadnezzar’s actions against Judah were actually commissioned by Yahweh the God of Judah (Jer 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). It is this God who gives Nebuchadnezzar a new title: “my servant” (Jer 25:9;

¹ More convincing historical and literary evidence show that Nebuchadnezzar’s insanity in Dan 4, should not be confused with the text of the so-called Prayer of Nabonidus. See the discussion on “The Prayer of Nabonidus;” and “4Q242 (4QPrNab) Text,” in Patrick Mazani, “The Book of Daniel in Light of the Ancient Near Eastern Literary and Material Finds: An Archaeological Perspective,” Ph.D. dissertation, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 2008, 421-427.

² Part of the recovered Neo-Babylonian laws address the anomalies in the society, see, for example, *COS* 2:360-361. In fact, the Neo-Babylonians were exposed to a comprehensive legislature dating back to the Old Babylonian dynasty of Hammurabi (c.1792-1750 BC) which dealt with different situations in the royal court and in the society. See also M. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia*, 2d ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997); and *COS* 2:332-381.

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27:6; 43:10). Nebuchadnezzar, wittingly or unwittingly, is the “servant” used by God to discipline the disobedient Judah.

Some scholars object strenuously to the concept of Nebuchadnezzar as God’s servant. These consider such language to be a serious scribal mistake.³ In fact, the Old Testament Greek text (LXX) deliberately avoids translating “my servant” in the corresponding verses (Jer 25:9; 34:5; 50:10). Despite this objection, many other scholars have viewed the title “my servant” as being appropriate because Nebuchadnezzar decimated Judah’s population in accordance with God’s plan for disciplining that nation.⁴ It is God who delivered King Jehoiakim and the temple resources to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon (Dan 1:2).⁵ In this instance, Nebuchadnezzar was simply a subordinate used by God to carry out His will.

“My servant” is a relational term. It denotes an existing relationship between a superior and a subordinate, for example, that of the Ugarit *b'l* “lord” or “master” and *'bd* “servant” or “vassal.”⁶ In the ancient Near East the term *'bd*, was used widely. In the biblical tradition *'bd*, could be technically used by the Hebrews (1 Sam 27:12; 2 Kgs 16:7) to mean “vassal.” In Ugarit *'bd*, was a technical term which meant “a vassal” as can

³ Werner E. Lemke, “Nebuchadnezzar, My Servant,” *CBQ* 28 (1966): 45-50. Lemke points out that the title “my servant” should only be used for the devotees of Yahweh, *ibid.*, 45-46.

⁴ Among those who share such an opinion is Thomas W. Overholt who argues that Nebuchadnezzar was part of Yahweh’s plan for Israel as presented in “King Nebuchadnezzar in the Jeremiah Tradition,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 39-48. See also Anneli Aejelaeus, “‘Nebuchadnezzar, My Servant’: Redaction History and Textual Development in Jer 27,” in *Interpreting Translation*, ed. F. Garcia Martinez and M. Vervenne (Leuven: University Press, 2005), 1-18.

⁵ Contrary to this opinion, Nebuchadnezzar boasted that it was Marduk and Nabu that “placed the lead rope of the numerous peoples into my hands.” Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “A New Inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II Commemorating the Restoration of Emah in Babylon,” *Iraq* 59 (1997): 96, col. ii, lines 51-54.

⁶ Ziony Zevit, “The Use of עבד, as a Diplomatic Term in Jeremiah,” *JBL* 88 (1969), 75. Zevit traces the use of עבד, as a technical term for vassal attested in Ugaritic; Phoenician, Aramaic, and Hebrew.

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be noted in King Niqmad of Ugarit's emancipation letter to his vassal ('*bdh.hnd*).⁷

The idea of Nebuchadnezzar being God's servant implies that the monarch was answerable to God for executing God's assignments. Being a servant of God is a serious appointment which calls for accountability in the strictest sense. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar lacked the personal commitment, faithfulness, dedication, devotion, and "conscious conviction"⁸ of his appointment as God's servant. Was he actually aware that he was God's servant when he was devastating Judah? The record does not state that he intended this campaign as an act of obedience to the Most High God. He did not necessarily have to be cognizant of God's decision to use him. God can use anybody to carry out His will without letting that individual know about it. A good example is Genesis 45:7 where Joseph said to his brothers, "God sent me before you, to put a remnant in the land for you, and to preserve alive for you a great deliverance." Clearly, the brothers' wickedness was used by God without their knowledge or consent for a greater good.

Nebuchadnezzar is attested as a servant of various deities on duplicate clay cylinders which were recovered from the ziggurat of Borsippa. The inscription on these cylinders is no doubt Neo-Babylonian and archaic, and it reads:

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, the loyal shepherd, the one permanently selected by Marduk, the exalted ruler, the one loved by Nabû, the wise expert who is attentive to the ways of the gods, the tireless governor, the caretaker of Esagil and Ezida, the foremost heir of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, I, when Marduk, my great lord, duly created me to take care of him, Nabû, the administrator of the totality of heaven and the netherworld, put in my hands the just scepter.⁹

Nebuchadnezzar's confession about his gods as inscribed on the cylinders, is expressive of far more devotion and loyalty than his confession

⁷ UT 1005; quoted in Zevit, "The Use of עֶבֶר, As a Diplomatic Term in Jeremiah," 75. Another example of the use of עֶבֶר to mean "vassal" is in UT 67 ii 12, where Baal appeals to Mot: '*bdk.an.wd'lmk*: "I am your bondsman [servant] forever."

⁸ Thomas W. Overholt, "King Nebuchadnezzar in the Jeremiah Tradition," *CBQ* 30 (1968), 39.

⁹ *COS*, 2:309.

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about Yahweh in Dan 2 and 3. In Dan 2:47 Nebuchadnezzar is talking about the wonderful God of Daniel, who does unusual things. He acknowledges: "For sure, your God is God of gods, and Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets since you were able to reveal this secret." In Dan 3:28 Nebuchadnezzar makes a nice speech about the God of the three young Hebrews. He proclaims, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in Him, and have defied the word of the king, and were willing to give up their bodies that they might not serve or worship any other god except their God."

In Dan 3:29, Nebuchadnezzar makes an empty promise which was never backed up by his personal commitment or his political muscle. Here he declares, "Therefore, I make a decree that people of any nation or language who speak anything amiss about the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be torn limb from limb and their house reduced to rubble because there is no god who can deliver like this." There is no record that this edict was carried out in Neo-Babylonia.

The confessions of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2:47 and 3:28-29, appear as hymns of praise to the God of the Hebrews. These two texts are also truth statements which, unfortunately, failed to be incorporated into the king's character. He was never known for his moral integrity. Further, Dan 2:47 and 3:28-29 were landmark confessions in Nebuchadnezzar's career as a servant of Yahweh. Yet his words did not appear to have any lasting impression on his life with regard to his accountability to Yahweh.

Nebuchadnezzar's praises are remarkable. He responded appropriately to Yahweh's dramatic demonstrations. He acknowledged that the God of the Hebrews was God of gods (Dan 2:47) and that there is no other god who could save like He does (Dan 3:29). Such praises are befitting the servant of Yahweh. The problem is that Nebuchadnezzar's praises were short-lived. Nebuchadnezzar spoke the truth about the God of the Hebrews but in essence he lacked the faith in that God to sustain the conviction in his own life. For "God's truth is to be individually recognized, understood, and applied."¹⁰

¹⁰ John Wesley Taylor V, "Encountering Truth: A Biblical Perspective," *JATS* 18 (2007): 194.

Nebuchadnezzar had tangible evidence of the unique character and power of the God of the Hebrews. For reasons known only to him, Nebuchadnezzar failed to build a relationship with the God who thus revealed Himself. The king accomplished God's mission without making a personal commitment to this God. This failure created a relational problem between Nebuchadnezzar and the God he worked for. Unfortunately, Nebuchadnezzar's actions betray him. His words about God should have been matched by his life. Nebuchadnezzar served at least two masters, Yahweh and Marduk. His allegiance was divided (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:13).

The Unforgotten Frightening Dream

It happened again. Nebuchadnezzar was terrified by another dream (Dan 4:4, 5). This time it was overwhelmingly intense and ominous. In his distress, he made an administrative error. He failed to include the leader of his intelligence service in his summons to an emergency consultation. Previously, in Dan 2:48, Nebuchadnezzar had put Daniel in charge of all the wise men who had failed to interpret an earlier dream. Considering Daniel's success in telling the king his first dream, and interpreting it, it seems strange that Nebuchadnezzar should now fail to consult first and foremost with Daniel, his chief of intelligence. Why he initially involved his Babylonian wise men and not Daniel the chief administrator over the wise men, is a puzzle. Even though, in this instance, the king remembered and related the dream, the Babylonian officials could not make sense out of what Nebuchadnezzar said about his dream (Dan 4:7). It was not until the illustrious wise men of Babylon were forced to admit defeat that Daniel was invited.

In the ancient courts, kings were surrounded by a group of highly qualified advisers who would interpret omens and advise the king on critical issues. The Joseph story is a good biblical example (Gen 41). In Neo-Assyria the king was always surrounded by his learned advisers who provided "personal discussion and explication of interpretations"¹¹ to the

¹¹ A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2:524. Many letters recovered from the Assyrian courts show the prominence of the kings' advisers. See S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian Scholars to Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, part 2 (Kevealer: Neukirchen-vluyn, 1970/1983); and R. F. Harper, *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters belonging to the Kouyounjik Collection of the British Museum*, 14

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king. Despite the input of the elite, the ancient king always had to make the final decision on what to do with the information provided by the wise men. A. Kuhrt argues that it is clear from the recovered evidence that the king had “sufficient knowledge to be in a position to estimate the likely accuracy of statements”¹² or even to challenge the interpretations.

Nebuchadnezzar continues calling Daniel by the name Belteshazzar (Dan 4:8, 9, 19). Daniel received this name when he was enrolled in King Nebuchadnezzar College (Dan 1:7). The Hebrew name Daniel means “God is my judge” or “My judge is God.” Belteshazzar is the Babylonian name *balâṭ-su-ušur* “protect his life” or *balaṭ-šar-ušur* “protect the life of the prince/king.”¹³ Perhaps the name Belteshazzar implied that the bearer was in a position and under obligation to protect the life of the king. If this was the case, Nebuchadnezzar should, for his own protection, have taken seriously the advice Belteshazzar (Daniel) provided (Dan 4:17).

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was vivid in his memory. He had forgotten other dreams in the past (Dan 2:2-7), but not this one. He related the dream to Daniel whom he preferred to call Belteshazzar (Dan 4:10-17). He had confidence in Daniel’s ability to give the authentic interpretation to the dream. Interestingly, when Daniel arrived to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s first recorded dream (Dan 2), Nebuchadnezzar posed a challenging question to Daniel: “Are you able?” (Dan 2:26). Later, when Daniel came before the monarch to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s last recorded dream (Dan 4), Nebuchadnezzar reversed his earlier words to Daniel. Instead of asking, “Are you able?” (Dan 2:26), the king now affirmed him by stating, “You are able” (Dan 4:18). Thus Nebuchadnezzar shifted from the interrogative mood to the affirmative mood. Such a shift shows that Nebuchadnezzar had established confidence in Daniel, as someone who could meet his expectations.

Daniel was possibly shocked by the king’s dream. It was apparent that the dream was evil. He hesitated to tell the king the interpretation of the dream because he had bad news for him. In ancient times the person who brought bad news which implicated the king would face execution. In fact,

vols. (London; Chicago: 1892-1914).

¹² Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC*, 2:524.

¹³ *BDB*, 117; J. J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 141; and Gerhard Pfandl, *Daniel: The Seer of Babylon* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2004), 16.

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Daniel wished that the dream could be applied to the king's enemies and adversaries (Dan 4:19). The idea of wishing misfortune and disaster on enemies still prevails in our contemporary world. We want our enemies to suffer devastating setbacks or even to die. Daniel's warning that the dream meant disaster to Nebuchadnezzar was expressed euphemistically (Dan 4:19). However, the king insisted on knowing the meaning of the dream. He sought to allay Daniel's fears. In fact, Daniel's fear was not based on what might happen to him should he tell the king the dream. Rather, Daniel was stunned at the gravity of the prediction concerning the king.

Daniel related the meaning of the dream without compromising the message (Dan 4:19-26). He added an appendix to the interpretation of the dream (Dan 4:27). The appendix was an appeal for the king to immediately reform his ways in the hope that he might avert the impending calamity. Daniel's appeal to the king was so clear and earnest that the king did not ask any further questions. He understood the gravity of his prophetic dream, but would make his own decision based on his own feelings about what his chief advisor had said. Nebuchadnezzar was not alarmed by Daniel's interpretation. He was not impressed to make the changes necessary to safeguard his future. Further, there is no record in Daniel 4 that Nebuchadnezzar conferred honor on Daniel or offered praise to Daniel's God for the interpretation of that dream. Perhaps he rejected Daniel's interpretation. Twelve months later, Nebuchadnezzar was still in denial (Dan 4:29, 30).

The role of wise men in the king's court was advisory only. The king had full jurisdiction in deciding whether or not to act upon the advice he received. The king could accept the advice or reject it. When God's word of warning comes to anyone it is left to the individual to make a decision based on whether to comply or to reject that word.

It is not altogether surprising that Nebuchadnezzar failed to give due credit to Daniel's advice. Earlier, Daniel had interpreted the dream of the image (Dan 2) and Nebuchadnezzar, although deeply impressed, did not act according to Daniel's advice. He made an image of gold alone—and not of the different metals seen in the dream (Dan 3:1, 5, 7, 10). By making an image of gold only, Nebuchadnezzar attempted to overrule Daniel's interpretation (Dan 2:37-45). He objected to the idea of being displaced by another inferior kingdom (Dan 2:39). Since nothing of consequence had happened to him when he acted contrary to Daniel's interpretation of his

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first dream, it was easy for Nebuchadnezzar to trust his own judgment with regard to later prophetic dreams.

It was deemed crucial for ancient kings to maintain their dignity and individuality. Nevertheless, in many cases where the ancient kings heeded the advice from their elite, all worked out well for them. The Pharaoh who followed Joseph's advice thereby saved Egypt and the whole region from the seven years of grueling drought and famine (Gen 41:56, 57).

Daniel kindly asked the king to seriously consider his advice. "Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you: break away now from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, in case there may be a prolonging of your prosperity" (Dan 4:27 [Heb. 4:24]). Nebuchadnezzar had "sins" and "iniquities" which displeased the Most High God, but Daniel hoped that something could be done to avoid the stated consequences. In other words, Nebuchadnezzar's sins and iniquities could be repented of, and it was in his power to change his course of action. Knowing Yahweh as he did, Daniel believed that such a course of action might result in the forgiveness of Nebuchadnezzar's sins and a possible delay or reversal of the threatened punishment.

Opportunity was given to Nebuchadnezzar to set right his bad record. Sins committed against other fellow humans were also committed against the God to whom they belonged. Nebuchadnezzar himself was responsible for repenting of the mistakes he had made during his career as a servant of Yahweh. His sins were to be forsaken, and his sincerity demonstrated by doing that which was right and just. He needed to become sensitive to the needs of others. In different ways and by different means, God gives each individual an opportunity to have his bad record expunged.

It is worthy of notice that the fate of Nebuchadnezzar is already determined by the holy beings (Dan 4:13, 17), but Daniel's advice, if heeded, seems to suggest that the divine plans for Nebuchadnezzar might be subject to change depending upon the king's response to his dream (Dan 4:27). Nebuchadnezzar already knew that "the spirit of the holy gods" (Dan 4:9) was in Daniel. Therefore, he knew that Daniel would not, in such a situation, offer his own opinions. Rather, the king's advisor was delivering a divine message, the rejection of which was an evidence of Nebuchadnezzar's attitude towards Yahweh, and not towards Daniel. It seems reasonable to assume that the king understood that Yahweh's message demanded an immediate response. The Hebrew particle conjunction "therefore," used here (in the Hebrew, Dan 4:24; and in the

English translation, Dan 4:27), seems to allow for the possibility of a change in Nebuchadnezzar's situation. However, "therefore" (Dan 4:27), can also act as a demonstrative adverb or an interjection, which primarily calls one's attention to some definite action which is to take place without failure. At any rate, a red flag was raised and Nebuchadnezzar would have done well to take the situation seriously. The call for repentance is always solemn and must be considered seriously and promptly. It is an emergency. "Therefore" (Dan 4:27) brings prospects of hope as well as of despair. Nebuchadnezzar is presented with a clear indication of the need to re-evaluate the course of his life after the dream. He is required to respond to the message promptly and in a responsible manner.

Nebuchadnezzar's Moral Deficits

Daniel pleaded earnestly with the king to consider the advice he presented. Perhaps the sentence determined upon the king could be ameliorated. Daniel's proposal focused on two requirements. Nebuchadnezzar's potential escape from the impending doom was predicated upon his willingness to separate himself from sins and iniquities (Dan 4:27). The Aramaic peal imperative verb *prq* (Dan 4:24, Eng 4:27) was widely used in the ancient near East. The Aramaic root *prq* means "to separate," "scatter," "drive off;"¹⁴ "tear away," or "break off"¹⁵ while the New Hebrew denotes "to remove" a burden or a load.¹⁶ Similarly, Akkadian *par^aqu* means "to separate" or "detach;" Ugarit *prq* "break," Syriac *p^eraq* "loose," or "rescue;" Samaritan *frq* "save" or "rescue;" Arabic *faraqa* "separate" or "divide;" and Ethiopic *faraqa* "free," "rescue."¹⁷ When used with regard to something detrimental or undesirable, *prq* means to detach oneself from that thing aggressively. It was thus that Daniel urged Nebuchadnezzar to separate himself from his sins. By using the verb *prq*, Daniel most probably demanded that Nebuchadnezzar initiate a "violent self-liberation"¹⁸ or "snatching out or tearing away associated with

¹⁴ Ernest Kline, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: MacMillan, 1987), s.v. "פָּרַק."

¹⁵ *BDB*, 1108.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 830.

¹⁷ F. Reiterer, "פָּרַק," *TDOT* (2003), 12:111.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12:113.

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rescue”¹⁹ from his own sins and iniquities. It may well have been a difficult and painful process but it was at least possible and in the end would have been very rewarding. That, for Nebuchadnezzar, would have been a saving act or a rescuing process.

What was it that Nebuchadnezzar needed to separate from? Daniel stated clearly to Nebuchadnezzar that “your sins” and “your iniquities” must be done away with immediately. Of course, there is a difference between sins and iniquities. The word sin, from the Hebrew/Aramaic root *ḥṭ*’ can be understood to be “the religious disqualification of specific modes of behavior”²⁰ and it “designates negative conditions and conduct, especially with reference to human agents in a religious context.”²¹ Sin is something done against the divine. This means that Nebuchadnezzar committed sins against God. Sin is to “miss a scope or aim,”²² “miss (a goal or way), go wrong.”²³ Post-modernity has dropped the word sin from its vocabulary. In the eyes of Yahweh, Nebuchadnezzar had some actions, omissions, or behaviors on his record which failed to meet Yahweh’s expectations.

Iniquities are “the transgressions of human beings toward others, transgressions inevitably prompting drastic consequences for the perpetrator.”²⁴ These are the offenses against humanity. Usually human rights movements are good at detecting these social crimes. When Daniel confronted Belshazzar the King on 12/13 October 539 BC, the night Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians, he reminded him about Nebuchadnezzar’s sins and iniquities (Dan 5:18-21). Nebuchadnezzar was appointed to be Yahweh’s servant and had become internationally recognized during his political career. After learning his duty before the King of Kings, he still killed people at will, and humiliated those whom he disliked. Besides his abuse of power, Nebuchadnezzar became so arrogant about his achievements that the Most High God saw the need to strip him of all his personal power and glory.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ K. Koch, “*chāṭā*,” *TDOT* (1980), 4:309.

²¹ Ibid., 4:310.

²² Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 254.

²³ *BDB*, 306.

²⁴ K. Koch, “*āwōn*,” *TDOT* (1999), 10:550.

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The pride of Nebuchadnezzar is attested in the biblical text as well as archaeological evidence. Dan 4:30 reads: “(Is) this not the great Babylon that I have built for my royal palace, by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?” There is a striking similarity between Nebuchadnezzar’s words in Dan 4:30 and his words in some of the Neo-Babylonian documents. In the Grotfend Cylinder Nebuchadnezzar boasted: “Then built I the palace, the seat of my royalty, the bond of the race of men, the dwelling of joy and rejoicing.”²⁵ He also declared in the India House Inscription that “in Babylon, my dear city, which I love, was the palace, the wonder of the people, the bond of the land, the brilliant place, the abode of majesty in Babylon.”²⁶ It seems that Nebuchadnezzar became inordinately proud of his achievements. He was “exalted to the pinnacle of worldly honor”²⁷ and became “so ambitious and so proud-spirited.”²⁸ Several wisdom sayings advise against pride (Prov 8:13; 11:2; 16:18; 29:23). The Most High God disciplined Nebuchadnezzar by exiling him to the fields where he lived as an animal among animals for seven years.

In Dan 4:27, Daniel pleaded with Nebuchadnezzar to break away from his wickedness by doing righteousness and showing mercy to the poor. Righteousness is doing right. Zvi H. Szubin defines righteousness as “the fulfillment of all legal and moral obligations,”²⁹ and it “requires not merely abstention from evil, but a constant pursuit of justice and the performance of positive deeds.”³⁰ Louis Jacobs points out that in Rabbinic literature righteousness is understood to include charity, almsgiving and practical benevolence.³¹ Righteousness “involves not only justice at a court of law

²⁵ *Keilinschriftliche bibliothek: Sammlung von Assyrischen und Babylonischen Texten in umschrift und übersetzung*, ed. Eberhard Schrader (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1890), 3/2:39, quoted in James A. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1927), 243.

²⁶ Charles F. Horne, *Babylonia and Assyria* (London: Parke, Austin and Lipscomb, 1917), 1:451-452, col. vii, lines 34-40.

²⁷ E. G. White, *The Story of Prophets and Kings* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1943), 514.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 515.

²⁹ Zvi H. Szubin, “Righteousness,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Second edition (2007) vol. 17:307.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Louis Jacobs, “Righteousness,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Second edition, (2007), 17:308.

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but correct behavior in social frameworks. The term is focused on one's function within the demands of specific relationships, and its meaning depends on whether the emphasis is on interaction among human beings or with God."³² Nebuchadnezzar fell far short of doing righteousness and showing mercy to the poor.

The Collection of Wealth

The Babylonian Chronicle (BM 21946 reverse, lines 12-13) attests that Nebuchadnezzar looted vast tribute from Judah and the surrounding areas he had defeated.³³ He carried the temple utensils from the Jerusalem temple and deposited them in the Esagila, the temple of Marduk, his god (Dan 1:2). The wealth which Nebuchadnezzar plundered from the vassal nations made Babylon to be the richest city in the ancient world. The India House Inscription of Nebuchadnezzar indicates:

Silver, gold, costly precious stones, bronze, *mismakannu*-and cedar wood, all conceivable valuables, great (?) superabundance, the product of the mountains, the wealth of the sea, a heavy burden, a sumptuous gift, I brought to my city of Babil before him, and deposited in Esagila, the palace of his lordship, a gigantic abundance. Ekua, the chamber of Marduk, lord of the gods, I made to gleam like the sun.³⁴

Nebuchadnezzar persisted in attributing his victories over other nations to his god Marduk. He did not recognize the God of the Hebrews as having any part in enabling his success. Moreover, there are no recovered records which show that Nebuchadnezzar re-invested any of his ill-gotten wealth in the countries he had plundered.

Social Obligations

Could it be that Nebuchadnezzar neglected to make provision for the needs of the poor of the conquered lands—the refugees whom he did not

³² Jutta Leonhardt-Balzer, "Righteousness in Early Jewish Literature," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), 4:808.

³³ A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 100.

³⁴ Koldewey, *The Excavations at Babylon* (London: Macmillan, 1914), 210-211. See also, Horne, *Babylonia and Assyria*, 1:442, lines 30-45.

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choose to take to Babylon (for example, 2 Kgs 25:12; Jer 39:10)? When Gedaliah the appointed governor over Judah was killed in 582 BC by Ishmael ben Nethaniah and his gang of dissidents (2 Kgs 25:25; Jer 41:2), Nebuchadnezzar never designated another leader for the poor people remaining in Judah. The Wadi Brisa Inscription identifies Nebuchadnezzar as “the just king.”³⁵ In 595 BC Nebuchadnezzar released a royal document which condemned Baba-aha-iddina son of Nabu-ahhe-bullit, one of his top officials who had rebelled against him. In the document Nebuchadnezzar described himself as the one who “determines right and justice”³⁶ and also as one who was responsible for destroying all criminals in the kingdom (cf. Dan 4:27; 5:19). In Mesopotamia, the concept of *mīšarum* was widely known. It involved establishing justice in the land, and speaking the truth. We have already noted that Nebuchadnezzar did not live up to his royal decree in Dan 3:29. Moreover, one is inclined to be suspicious of Nebuchadnezzar’s criteria for whom he chose to kill or to spare (Dan 5:19).

It seems that Nebuchadnezzar might have forgotten, or somehow neglected some critical traditional practices. Evidence shows that all over Mesopotamia, some parts of the Levant (north Syria), and also Elam, it was customary, or even obligatory for kings to publish a decree showing their affirmation of social justice. This publication was generally done about the time of their accession.³⁷ The main purpose for such an edict was to rectify the social anomalies which were caused by debt.

Usually the process for correcting the imbalances in the society began by lighting torches as a public sign that the royal announcement was soon to take place. The king would assemble his officials at his palace and present to them the written edict. All the tablets on which creditors had recorded what their debtors owed would be collected and destroyed. Whoever had his debt record destroyed, was free from the obligation of repaying that debt. Thus, those who were socially undermined or ostracized because of debt delinquency would be rehabilitated in the society. This was repeated at three or seven year intervals as long as the king was on the royal

³⁵ *ANET*, 307.

³⁶ E. Weidner, “Hochverrat gegen Nebuchadnezzar II,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 17 (1954-56): 1-9; for translation see Kuhrt, *ANE*, 2:596-597.

³⁷ A. Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 1:77; 110.

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throne. So far, we have no record showing that Nebuchadnezzar ever participated in this process.

Nebuchadnezzar was consistent in honoring his Babylonian gods although he acknowledged that the Most High God was unique. One of Nebuchadnezzar's prayers to Marduk probably offered in 598 BC reads:

I then raised my hand; to the lord of lords,
to Marduk, the merciful, my supplications went forth:
"O lord of the lands, Marduk, hear the utterance of my mouth!
Let me be fully content in my palace, which I built!
Let me reach old age within Babylon!
Let me enjoy a ripe old age!"³⁸

Nebuchadnezzar maintained his fidelity to his gods despite rendering a certain level of service to the Most High God who had demonstrated his uniqueness and power through the Hebrew captives. It is important to note that Yahweh did not sentence Nebuchadnezzar for crimes committed in ignorance. It was not until the monarch had a thorough knowledge of the power and plans and supremacy of the God of gods and then rejected His claims that he was held accountable for his actions.

Since Nebuchadnezzar would not comply with the requirements of the Most High God, the dream came true for him twelve months after its interpretation (Dan 4:29). While Nebuchadnezzar was proclaiming his own greatness, a voice from heaven spoke, and immediately, the monarch's mind became deranged. He went out and ate grass like the cattle (vv. 31-33). After the seven years of bull-like life, Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes toward heaven in humility and praise to the King of the universe. Having learned his lessons and passed the test (v. 34) he was restored to his throne, a wiser, humbler, better man.

Conclusion

The Most High God graciously bestowed upon King Nebuchadnezzar the title, "My Servant." The monarch had the opportunity to learn about the requirements of this God through his Hebrew captives. This haughty king

³⁸ Benjamin Studevent-Hickam, "Nebuchadnezzar II: 604-562 BCE," in *The Ancient Near East: Historical Sources in Translation*, ed. Mark W. Chavalas (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006): 386.

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however, disdained to be a humble servant to the Most High God. He did not deign to consider himself responsible to anyone for his behavior towards his subjects.

When Zedekiah king of Judah (598/7-587/6 BC) rebelled, the Babylonian army chased him from Jerusalem and captured him by the plains of Jericho (Jer 39:5-7). They brought Zedekiah to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah where Nebuchadnezzar decided the fate of his rebellious vassal. Nebuchadnezzar killed Zedekiah's sons before him and then gorged out his eyes before carrying him to Babylon as a captive. In Daniel 4 we see that the Most High God is disciplining Nebuchadnezzar his disobedient servant. The form of discipline was unusual, but it worked.

After seven years of beast-like behavior, Nebuchadnezzar came to terms with reality and with God (Dan 4:34-35). Lifting his eyes toward heaven is a sign of realizing and acknowledging that the Most High God controls human power and destiny. His intellect was restored. Nebuchadnezzar had "lost sight of God's purpose on world nations"³⁹ (Dan 2). His pride would not allow God's plans to take place in his life. It took him seven literal years to discover that the King of Heaven's "works (are) truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to humble" (Dan 4:37). Nebuchadnezzar's testimony about God in Dan 4:34-35, 37 is a genuine statement of praise from a convicted and converted individual. Nebuchadnezzar was reestablished in his sovereignty with added greatness and honor. His advisers who had previously failed him, surrounded him again (Dan 4:36). What would these advisers and nobles contribute to the changed Nebuchadnezzar?

The God of heaven can use anyone to accomplish His divine mission. Achieving what God wants does not overrule moral integrity and responsibilities. Those who develop a working relationship with this God, should be very sensitive to divine promptings and demands. What counts most when working for God is faithfulness to Him.

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³⁹ White, *The Story of Prophets and Kings*, 514.