DANIEL

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In memory of Professor Ben Segal,
who taught me Biblical Aramaic.

Languages

Our Bible Week is always conducted in two languages, German and English. Sometimes, the act of translating leads to confusion. A question is asked. Occasionally, the answer generates even more confusion, leading to a heated and sometimes amusing debate in both languages. In the end, things normally become clearer, but sometimes the question becomes an unsolved riddle. It's all about the correct *pesher*, interpretation.

The Book of Daniel also contains two languages. They are Hebrew and Aramaic. The book begins in Hebrew and continues until we get to the words *va-y'dabru hakkasdim l'melekh Aramit*, 'The Chaldeans spoke to the King in Aramaic'. (2:4) What they said is then quoted in Aramaic, and after that the whole story continues in Aramaic right up until the end of Daniel 7, after which it swaps back into Hebrew for the rest of the book.

Hebrew was the language of the exiles from the land of Judah, and Aramaic was the new official language of the city and the Empire of Babylon. Historically their main language had been Akkadian: Aramaic, which is also called 'Chaldean' in Daniel, was introduced by King Darius around 500 BCE, after the time the book is *set*, but well before the time it was *composed*, so that we are to imagine it was the language of the court of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.

Some think the book originally was all in Aramaic, others that it was all in Hebrew. But I think it was written just the way we have it, as a representation of a world of confusion and sudden reversals. There are wordplays, lists and riddles, and the separate stories of which Daniel is made up have unexpected twists. There are the lentils and water, which give you a glow of health unknown by meat eaters, there is the fire which does not burn, the king who eats grass like an ox, the writing which can be read but not explained, and the lions which do no harm. Each of these incidents requires its *pesher*, its interpretation, just like a foreign language. And all of them take place in Bavel / Babylon, the city in which the original inhabitants began to build a huge tower, and God mixed up all their languages (Genesis 11:1-9). The whole of the first half of Daniel is set in the city of confusion brought about by this unique event. In English that story is known as the Tower of Babel, perhaps to create a pun between Babel and 'babble', but in Hebrew and other languages, including German, Babel and Babylon are the same word. (Some have understood the word as *bab'el*, 'gate of God' in Aramaic).

The strangest thing about the Tower of Babel story is the outcome. The reader imagines that from this point onwards people who speak different languages will never be able to understand each other. But this often does not happen. How come Aaron the Hebrew was appointed as spokesman for Moses, who had grown up at the Egyptian court and knew the language? How was it that in the wanderings in the desert Moses could communicate with the other peoples that they met, each of whom had their own language? The Bible occasionally refers to interpreters, but nobody is described as going on a language course, until we get to the Book of Daniel. At the very start of the book, as if it was completely normal, we are told Daniel and his friends are enrolled in a three year course *lelamm-dam sefer ul'shon Kasdim*, 'to learn the literature and the language of the Chaldeans.' After they have graduated, the narrative of our book will take up their new language. But meanwhile (1:6) there is a list, the first of many lists in the book, which gives the names in Hebrew of Daniel and his friends. Every language carries with it its own world and culture. When Daniel and his friends study Aramaic they are also learning the empty pomp and ceremony of Babylon's court. As they register at Bavel University for their three year degree course, they are given Aramaic names. As the names go from Hebrew to Aramaic, so will the Book of Daniel itself. The translations of their names mark a cultural shift. Daniel, in Hebrew means 'God is my judge.' Belteshazzar, his Aramaic name, means 'the wisdom of the God Bel' (Rashi). Is *Bel* simply the equivalent of the Hebrew *El,* or is it the pagan god? One answer to that question can be found in the Greek version of the book of Daniel, which has two extra chapters, and the second of these, chapter 14 of the extended book, is known as 'Bel and the Dragon.' In that story Bel is an idol in the time of King Cyrus. Notice too the confusing similarity between Daniel's Aramaic name Belteshazzar and the later Babylonian King Belshazzar, meaning 'Bel, protect the prince'. The names of Daniel's friends undergo similar changes – and it is immediately after that that Daniel rebels: he is not going to eat the officially allowed food – it will *defile* him – a word from the Hebrew root *ga'al* which normally means 'redeem', but by a euphemistic reversal – a common device to avoid saying a bad word – comes to mean 'defile, pollute'. The point is that Daniel has agreed to learn the language and the culture, but has decided from day one that he will not allow it to change him. And so, with God's help, he enters a parallel world where the King's punishments cannot harm him and his friends, and he understands meanings and interpretations that the king cannot.

Anathea Portier-Young explains the language question simply: the Hebrew in chapter 1 takes us back to the language and faith Daniel has come from: the Aramaic of the following chapters is the language of the Empire he now lives in, a language he has to use. The language of the book continues in the official language of Babylonia until the apocalyptic visions of future empires, and then it reverts to Hebrew.

Date and Genre, and Chapter 1 – Benefits of a vegan diet

Daniel is not considered a prophet in Jewish tradition. The French commentator Rashi (1040-1105) explains:

> The others prophesied to Israel as God's agents, but Daniel was not sent to Israel for the purpose of prophesy. (Rashi on Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 3a)

By this he means that, unlike most prophets who have Biblical books named after them, 'the word of God' did not come to Daniel. God spoke to him in visions and through an angel.

There is virtually a consensus among modern scholars that the book of Daniel was written in or round the 160s BCE because of events described mainly in chapter 11. Their view follows that of the third century neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry of Tyre (234-305). We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls about other Jewish literature from the second century BCE written in Aramaic. Daniel 11 is thought to refer to the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus IV, but does not mention the revolt of the Maccabees or the rededication. If correct, that gives the book a very precise dating,

although I think there could be allusions to the Chanukah rededication of the Temple in Chapters 3 and 5. Tefillin from that time have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, using a recognisable form of what the rabbis later called *k'tav Ashur*, Assyrian writing, very similar to the letters used for Hebrew and Aramaic printing today. Throughout antiquity, Hebrew and Aramaic did not have the diacritics and vowel signs which were invented in the early centuries of Islam.

This late date helps to explain why Daniel has such a different feel from other biblical books. Here at Bible Week participants have studied books such as Proverbs, Job and Psalms, known collectively as 'wisdom literature'. I propose that Daniel is really part of a different genre, which could be called Second Temple Literature of Piety. It includes the books of Esther, Judith, Tobit, Maccabees 2 (with its story of Hannah and her seven sons) and the Greek novel *Joseph and Aseneth*. All these books contain events which reverse the course of the narrative, or even the course of history, through the piety of one of the central characters. The notion of a world turned upside down is familiar to Jews from the story of Esther and the festival of Purim. Indeed the motto *v'nahafokh hu,* 'it was turned upside down' (Esther 9:1) could serve equally well as a heading for the six stories of the first half of the Book of Daniel. As a dream interpreter, Daniel was in the tradition of Joseph, whose life was three times turned upside down, firstly when he was sold as a slave, secondly when he was thrown into prison, and thirdly when appointed second in command of the whole of Egypt. Reading Daniel we can see echoes not only of Joseph, but of the Tower of Babel and Esther as well. Our book uses many of the Persian words used in Esther, even though they would not have been the terms used in the court of Babylon before the Persian conquest.

The refusal to worship pagan gods is the most frequent test of this literature of piety, but a strong second theme is the refusal to eat non-kosher food. In the so-called 'conversion scene' in the Greek novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, the biblical Joseph's future wife throws both her idols and her food out of the window of her father's palace in Heliopolis. Judith takes her kosher food with her in a special bag when she goes to visit the Assyrian general Holofernes, and after cutting off his head, walks calmly away with it in the same bag. But only the book of Daniel elevates the question of *kashrut* to the very start of the story, setting the scene for what follows.

And now here are a very few of the flips, inversions and language puzzles in the next few stories.

Chapter 2 – The Four Kingdoms

Like Pharaoh in Genesis, King Nebuchadnezzar has an eerie dream which turns out to be about the future of his land. As Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, so Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream – but there is an added twist. Daniel also has to remind the King what happened in the dream, for it seems he forgot when he woke up. The dream was of a great statue, with a head of gold, arms of silver, belly of brass, legs of iron and feet of iron and clay. A stone was hewn which struck the feet of the statue and crushed them. Daniel, to whom the secret has been revealed by God in a vision, flatters the king by telling him that he himself is the head of gold and the various kingdoms to come later will be gradually inferior.

How is this to be explained? The first and most comprehensive Jewish commentary on Daniel is that of Rav Saadia Gaon (born Egypt 882; died Sura, near Baghdad, 942). He translated most of the bible into Judeo-Arabic with an extensive commentary. His work is called *Tafsir*, meaning an interpretation, an Arabic word related to the Hebrew *pesher* and Aramaic *pishra*. Saadia's *tafsir,* interpretation of the kingdoms which would follow Babylon is that they will be Persia, Greece, and *Edom*, by which he means Rome. Both the iron and the clay represent Rome. The fact that the whole statue stands on 'feet of clay' – the common English expression comes from this passage – shows that it can only stand 'because of the will of its maker'. We can compare God's words to Jeremiah (18:6): 'Behold! Like clay (*chomer*) in the hands of the potter, so are you in my

hand, House of Israel.' Thus Saadia explains the text, adding that the solid and stable stone represents the people of Israel. He considers it one of the greatest miracles that the sages of old accepted the prophecy of Daniel long before they knew which kingdoms would arise on the earth (Alobaidi).

Chapter 3 – The fiery furnace

I shall mention just one interesting and amusing phrase. The action of the first part of the chapter takes place at the ceremony of *chanukat tzalma*, the dedication of the image. If you know the Hebrew phrase *chanukat Habayit*, dedication of the house, or the festival of Chanukah, the re-dedication of the Temple altar by the Maccabees, you will notice the grandiose distortion in this phrase being used for the dedication of a pagan image. Perhaps here too, we have another indication of the Maccabean date.

Chapter 4 – The King's madness

King Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream of a tall and flourishing tree reaching to heaven: an *ir v'kaddish,* 'a watcher and a holy one' then descends from heaven and instructs him to cut down the tree and just leave a stump. The commentators Rashi and Ibn Ezra glossed the 'watcher and holy one' as an angel. Daniel interprets the dream for the King: the King himself is the tree and he will be driven from humanity and eat grass like an ox for a period of time described as 'seven fixed times' – either seasons or years. This duly happens, and he lives like an animal, his hair and nails unkempt, and eats grass, until eventually his *manda,* his 'knowledge' is restored. It is likely that the Aramaic term *manda* is the origin of the name of the Gnostic faith known as Mandaean. Magical Mesopotamian texts suggest that such an illness could have a divine source (Avolas). Matthias Henze has investigated possible sources of the story in some detail. One particularly interesting one is the neanderthal figure of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh (2nd millennium BCE), who gradually becomes a human:

> There was a young man who came from the mountains. All the time he eats herbs with cattle, all the time he sets his feet at the watering place. Shaggy with hair his whole body, he has tresses like a woman. He knows neither people nor culture.

Enkidu turns into a man of culture, but with Nebuchadnezzar the journey is the other way. It is an absolutely deliberate reversal of a familiar legend of a wild man. But it is also a study of a specific mental illness once known as lycanthropy, the delusion of being a wolf. In ancient times much less distinction was made between the categories of physical illness, mental illness, physical injury and psychological damage than we make today. Alongside this, the spiritual world and the physical world were imagined to be much closer. The King descends into some kind of lower world where he is estranged from human company and normal human understanding. Astonishingly, the story is told as if by King Nebuchadnezzar in the first person. Eastern Christian theologians such as Aphrahat and Ephrem have seen Nebuchadnezzar as an example of exemplary penitence, but the rabbinic tradition is more ambivalent about him. Daniel himself explains to his son Belshazzar that his madness was a punishment for his pride (5:20-21).

Chapter 5 – The Writing on the Wall

This is the key story for my theme of misunderstood language and sudden reversals. The story takes us back to the Tower of Babel. Our Bible week scholar Jan Fokkelman has pointed out how one of many word patterns in that story illustrates the central theme:

Genesis 1:3 And they said one to another, come, *nilb'nah l'venim*, 'let us brick bricks'. Here the Hebrew words have the root letters *lamed bet nun*.

Genesis 1:7 Let us go down *v'nivlah*, 'let us confuse' their language. This Hebrew word contains the letters *nun bet lamed.*

'Just as the word letters are reversed, so another reversal is indicated: as the men build, so God pulls down.'

The Tower of Babel was built using *chemar la-chomer*, 'bitumen as mortar'. King Belshazzar begins his feast by drinking *chamra,* wine, a word with the same root letters. Daniel reminds him that his kingdom contains 'all languages.'

At the Tower of Babel, God's message was to everyone, but here God writes words that only his servant Daniel can understand. God's role in history is now only available to those who can understand God's language. Daniel can interpret dreams, solve riddles, and loosen knots (5:12). He reveals that it is not just language but the destiny of empires which is different in the world after Babel. The mysterious writing is not in his language, Hebrew, but in the King's language, Aramaic. How absurd that it needs interpretation! Our story's finest moment comes in verse 5:28, where Daniel explains the last word of the writing on the wall, the word *p'ras*, a word which means half a shekel. Daniel creates a threefold pun. It is half a shekel, Belshazzar's kingdom will be divided in two (*p'risat malchutach*) and given to the Medes and the Persians (*Paras*). He solemnly tells this to the king. He and his courtiers have every language represented in their empire (5:19) but cannot read their own fate and the fate of the city where languages were originally split. That very night his city is captured. The Greek historian Herodotus tells us how the Persian army got in. The Babylonians had shut themselves inside with a great store of food. King Cyrus diverted the course of the River Euphrates by digging a canal into an old reservoir, and then marched his army into the town along the river-bed under the walls. He continues (Herodotus 1.191):

> Because of the great size of the city – as is said by those living there – after the outer parts of the city had been captured, the Babylonians living in the centre did not know that the city was captured, but they happened to be holding a festival, and continued dancing and enjoying themselves, until they discovered the inevitable and the city stormed.

Daniel 5:29: Then commanded *Belsha'tsar v'halbishu*, 'Belshazzar and he clothed' Daniel with scarlet and put a chain of gold on his neck. The word for 'clothed' looks like a pun on Belshazzar's own name. He *clothes* the one who *lays bare* the meaning of the writing. Pharaoh and Ahasuerus had also given the gift of grand clothes, but this time it is a ridiculous parody, because that very night Belshazzar is overthrown. Beware the words you don't understand, for they may reveal your destiny.

Conclusion

Today, Hebrew and English are the most common spoken languages of the Jewish people, each with about 7 million speakers. Just as the final editor of Daniel eventually went back to Hebrew, so have the people of Israel in modern times. Like empires, languages can rise and fall and even rise again.

I do hope everyone here will enjoy Daniel, both its elegance and its clumsiness, both its ethical messages and its rich absurdity. We still live a world where languages breed confusion, and care with translation is required at every moment of this week, and at every moment of this book. May our faces not fall nor our knees knock together when we come across words we do not understand. With care, like Daniel, we too can 'solve riddles and loosen knots.' (5:12)

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