

**“ALL PEOPLES, NATIONS AND LANGUAGES” (DAN 3:4)
THE BOOK OF DANIEL AS A “CATHOLIC” BOOK**

Regina Wildgruber

With the Book of Daniel, the Jewish-Christian Bible Week has chosen a topic that makes the area of tension between Jewish and Christian reading of the Bible particularly vivid. Because with a Jewish-Christian reading of Daniel the question immediately arises: Which text do we want to read together? For the Book of Daniel is not only in itself in two languages – Hebrew and Aramaic; there are also two Greek versions that are in part clearly different from the Hebrew-Aramaic Book of Daniel. One of these Greek versions of the text forms the Book of Daniel’s basis in many Christian editions of the Bible. What this means in detail is a complex question, which will not be my topic this afternoon.

But what I want to hold onto is that by its reception in Judaism and in Christianity, the Book of Daniel is connected with two world languages of Antiquity: with Aramaic as the language of the great Achaemenid Empire and with Greek as the common language of the Hellenistic cultural region during the centuries before and after the beginning of our common era as it extended from Asia to the Mediterranean region.

The basis of my discussion of the Book of Daniel today is the Hebrew-Aramaic version. Even if that is precisely not the version I use as a Catholic Christian in church services, I want to try to read the Book of Daniel today as a “catholic” book. I think that works pretty well ...

First of all and above all, the Book of Daniel is a Jewish book. It deals with Jewish protagonists and with a theme, that is inseparably interwoven with Judaism and its history – the experience of the Diaspora. It deals with fidelity to the God of Israel, which often enough brings those who adhere to it into difficulties and dilemmas, even to the point of life-threatening situations. This experience has accompanied Jews ever since biblical times.

In the Book of Daniel, the stage is catholic. When I say this, I don’t mean “catholic” as the name of a Christian denomination (with a Church leadership that usually wears white and lives in Rome), but in the literal sense as “all embracing”. Understood thus, catholicity has been from the beginning an important characteristic of Christianity: It turns to people from the whole world. “Go to all the world”, is what the risen Christ commissioned his apostles to do at the end of the Gospel according to Mark (Mk 16:15). And in the story of Pentecost, “devout people from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) witness a miracle worked by God’s Spirit: They hear the disciples of Jesus – though all Galileans – speaking their own language.

Catholicity in the sense of turning to people from the whole world is so important to early Christianity that the key word is taken into the first official Creed. We can read in the 4th century Creed

of Nicea and Constantinople: “I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church”. This text was written at a time before Christianity split into various denominations. It is thus a common heritage of all Churches – no matter whether today they are called Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox.

However, this catholicity – so the turning to people from all the world – is not a characteristic only of Christians, nor is it a New Testament invention. Understood in this way, the Book of Daniel also has a “catholic background noise”. This becomes implicit already in the two languages in which the book was received – the world languages Aramaic and Greek. But the worldwide horizon is named explicitly in the book. We can encounter the formulation, “all peoples, nations and languages” repeatedly in Daniel 3 (3, 4, 7, 31; cf. 3:29), and it is taken up again in Daniel 5:19 and 6:26. So in the Book of Daniel as well, turning to people from the whole world apparently plays an important role. In what follows, I would like to see how exactly this happens.

The Book of Daniel opens up a whole panorama. With the deportation of Daniel and his companions to the court of the king of Babylon, the reality of a world empire becomes the background image of the Daniel narrative: an empire that stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Even just this reality makes clear, what an enormous multiplicity of ethnicities, languages and cultures can be met in such a political space.

The narrative setting thus introduces a theme that is present in Israel’s Bible / in the Old Testament almost from the beginning: The multiplicity of peoples that cannot be grasped, and the question regarding the role in this of Israel, the people of God. God’s answer to the chaos among the peoples caused by human beings, as told in the building of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, is the call to Abraham in Genesis 12 – for the blessing of all peoples! There it says: “(...) in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). So from the beginning, the worldwide horizon is inseparably connected with Israel, the people of God.

So what does this mean in the situation in which Daniel, Azariah, Hananiah and Mishael find themselves in the midst of the peoples? Not as visitors or travellers, but as people who have been deported, in a situation of dependency on those who won the war, a situation that can quickly become a threat to life.

In the Book of Daniel, the representatives of the peoples have a face and a name. They are the kings Nebuchadnezzar and his successors who appear opposite Daniel and his companions. As political representatives of the multi-ethnic states, they are also symbols of the world of nations.

These kings are not popular figures. This applies above all to Nebuchadnezzar, who historically was an oppressor and a warlord, who marked an absolute low point in the history of Israel, the people of God. In the Book of Daniel he is introduced as the one who conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, who is not interested in the fate of those conquered or in interfaith dialog. After his return from his war campaign in Judea – again at home in Babylon – he apparently goes through a very astonishing learning process. He becomes – more or less – a worshipper of the God of Israel. In this, Daniel and his companions play a decisive role as mediators.

This is pretty surprising, as this king does not really seem at all willing to learn. He behaves like an arbitrary ruler and despot who is literally ready to go over dead bodies. In Daniel 1, he pressurises the wise people of Babylon not only to interpret a dream for him, but also to tell him what he dreamed. Since of course nobody can do that, he wants to have all the wise people killed – including Daniel and his companions. And in Daniel 3, the same king has the three young Israelites Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael thrown into a red-hot oven because they are not prepared to adore a monumental statue.

This king is not harmless. On the contrary. And precisely this king experiences in Daniel, chapters 2-4, a fundamental transformation, he goes through a learning process that makes him appear at the end as a believer in the God of Israel.

This becomes clear at the end of chapters 2, 3 and 4, when Nebuchadnezzar ends the experiences of which these chapters tell with a kind of prayer or song of praise. This alone would already be remarkable. But in addition, an obvious development is also visible. Let us take a look at the text:

At the end of chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar states: "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you [Daniel] have been able to reveal this mystery." (Dan 2:47)

At the end of chapter 3, it says: "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants (...)" (Dan 3:28), and also "there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way." (Dan 3:29)

And in the introduction to chapter 4, the king confesses: "It seemed good to me to make known the signs and wonders that the highest God has done for me. How great are his signs and how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, and his rule (endures) from generation to generation!" (Dan 3:34-33)

An ever greater closeness to the God of Israel is mirrored in the words of the king. At first he seems impressed above all by God's abilities. With the help of his God, Daniel was in chapter 2 the only one among the wise people of Babylon who was able both to tell the king his dream and to interpret it. This god must be a very powerful god, who stands above all other gods. So in Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar's "theology" clearly assumes the existence of a multiplicity of gods – which corresponds with Babylonian thinking. But after his encounter with Daniel, the most powerful god for him is not, as would be expected, the Babylonian city god Marduk or Nabu, who gave him his name, but "your god".

Your god – to what does the possessive pronoun refer? On the background of the narrative, it can only refer to Daniel and his companions, a concrete group whom the king has come to know. Is it already clear to the king at this point that this god is the God of Israel?

This cannot be said entirely unequivocally. With the formulation "God of gods", Nebuchadnezzar is definitely moving within the linguistic space of the Bible. The God of Israel is called the "God of gods" and the "Lord of lords" in Psalm 136:2 and in Deuteronomy 10:17 – both texts which also open up a wide horizon.

Thus Psalm 136 connects God's creative activity with Israel's being delivered from Egypt. The God of gods is thereby the second name of God used in the Psalm – right after the name of God in the first verse. The multiplicity of God's names is thereby surely an effective literary means, which achieves an increasing dynamic already at the beginning of the Psalm. But the order of God's names – "God of gods" – "Lord of lords" – also has the effect of a translation: While God's own name is bound exclusively to God's history with Israel, the formulations "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" can be understood independently of this.

An explicit reference to life in a foreign place can be found in Deuteronomy 10:17, the parallel verse to Psalm 136: Moses reminds the people that the Living One is "the God above the gods and the Lord over the lords". "He is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the orphan and the widow. He loves the strangers, providing food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Deut 10:17-19) The God of gods and Lord of lords is used here first of all as a superlative to make clear that the Living One is above all

others. But the fact that the explanation of God's name by means of the description "God of gods" and "Lord of lords" is connected with an indication of the people's own experience in a foreign country seems at least worth mentioning.

Now it would of course be nice if Nebuchadnezzar also used the formulation "God of gods and Lord of lords" in Daniel 2 like in Psalm 136 and Deuteronomy 10. Unfortunately, he does not do this. Instead he speaks of the "Lord of kings". This name is not documented as a name of God in the Bible. Rather, it seems to take up a Persian phrase and can be explained in Daniel 2 as coming from the king's point of view (John J. Collins). It becomes clear here that the power of the kings is not unlimited, but rather that there is a lord of the kings who can and will cause the kings' edifice of power to come down.

It is not possible to deduce from the song of praise at the end of chapter 3 whether the king still assumes the existence of many gods after his experience of the "young men in the fiery oven". But what is clear is that the king's language continues to approach biblical language. He speaks a kind of *brakhah*, a song of praise to God as it also exists in many other places in the Bible, and as it still stands today at the beginning of many Jewish prayers.

Nebuchadnezzar thereby does not speak to God as someone opposite him – he speaks of him in the third person. And just as before, he doesn't understand this God as his God, but as the God of the Jewish young men. But he does emphasise this God's uniqueness even more clearly: There is no other god who can deliver like this. This is not a confession of the God of Israel as the only One. But is it possible to say that the king is on the way to this insight? After all, Nebuchadnezzar does share in Israel's fundamental experience of God: This God is the only one who delivers. In the Bible, the experience of being delivered from slavery in Egypt and from Pharaoh's deadly threat at the sea cannot be separated from the insight that the God who delivers in this way is the one and only One. With his song of praise to the God of Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael, Nebuchadnezzar is already close to a statement found in the Book of Isaiah: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other." (Isa 45:22; cf. Rolf Rendtorff)

In the introduction to chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar has arrived definitively to the Bible's language and experience: he confesses that the highest God has worked signs and wonders for him. This God's rule is from generation to generation.

"Signs and wonders" – this formulation refers in many places in the Bible to Israel's being rescued at the sea, especially in the Book of Deuteronomy, where we encounter the phrase in four places (Deut 6:22; 7:19; 29:2; 34:11). The phrase "from generation to generation" is to be found exclusively in the Psalms. Nebuchadnezzar even uses it twice. In the frame of the very personal story he tells in Daniel 4, the formulation comes at the beginning (Dan 3:33) and at the end (Dan 4:31). Unlike in Daniel 2 and 3, where Nebuchadnezzar became a witness to God's acting, in Daniel 4 he experiences something in his own person. He goes through an existential crisis; he loses his mind and gets it back. How exactly this happens doesn't become really clear in the somewhat peculiar and enigmatic chapter 4. But overcoming this crisis leads to Nebuchadnezzar praising the God of Israel in the language of the Bible.

The formulation "from generation to generation" thereby qualifies God's rule as a lasting, eternal rule. For Nebuchadnezzar, who until then had sought to ensure his power as warlord and arbitrary ruler, this is an incisive realization: His power as king is limited, he is dependent on God – on the God who does signs and wonders. With this, Nebuchadnezzar does not mean Israel's liberation from Egypt. He is rather interpreting his own history – he loses his mind and gets it back – as "signs and wonders ... that the highest God has worked for me". In other words: He himself experienced being saved by the God who is the only One able to save.

That which until now has implicitly been part of the king's role – to have access to the peoples of the earth as ruler over a multi-ethnic state – is named explicitly in the introduction to Daniel 4. Nebuchadnezzar turns with his narrative “to all peoples, nations and languages who dwell on the whole earth.” (Dan 3:31) He thereby realises his role as multiplier and presents his experiences on a worldwide stage. All human beings are to hear it.

Unlike his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar does not sing songs of praise in Daniel 5. In the dynamics of the Book of Daniel, he is the negative counter-example to Nebuchadnezzar. As his son and successor, he should have known better. But unlike his father, he is ignorant and remains with this attitude. He does not come to a good end.

King Nebuchadnezzar's learning process is continued by the successor to his successor in Daniel 6 and brought to its point. This third king in the Book of Daniel is called Darius the Mede. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, he has no historical counterpart. The Median group of peoples does play an important role in the history of the Achaemenid Empire, but kings by the name of Darius are exclusively Persian kings. In the internal chronology of the Book of Daniel, a Median kingdom, a second kingdom, is necessary between the Babylonians and the Persians. All attempts to find a historical point of reference over and beyond this for “Darius the Mede” lead to no result.

Unlike King Nebuchadnezzar, King Darius is from the beginning very affectionate with Daniel. He can only be forced through an intrigue to condemn his valued civil servant to death. He tries everything to prevent this. Even when the judgment has been pronounced and Daniel is already in the lions' den, the king remains connected with Daniel. Very early in the morning he hastens to the lions' den – and becomes witness to a miracle: God has rescued Daniel from the jaws of the lions.

To this, the king again reacts with a song of praise: “For he is the living God, enduring forever; and his dominion (endures) until the end. (God,) who liberates and rescues and gives signs and wonders in heaven and on the earth, has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.” (Dan 6:27-28)

In King Darius's song of praise, elements from Nebuchadnezzar's prayers of praise return, but now bundled once again, almost a kind of confession of faith: The god of Daniel is the living God, his rule has no limits, neither in time – he remains for all eternity – nor in space – he acts in heaven and on earth. With the key words “to rescue and to liberate” as well as “signs and wonders”, Israel's being rescued at the Sea of Reeds resonates in the language of the Bible. The key word “heaven and earth” recalls creation as God's fundamental miracle. In his prayer of praise, Darius thereby calls out the all-embracing rule of Israel's God. But he does not end with the personal confession. What the king has understood is also to be valid for all his subjects: “I command that everywhere where my kingdom rules, one is to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel.” (Dan 6:27)

This again recalls the formulation in the Psalms when it is said in Psalm 2:11: “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with *trembling!*” Faced with Daniel's being rescued, Darius can obey the call that goes out from there to the kings and judges of the earth (Ps 2:10), and he can pass on his insight to all human beings.

With King Darius's confession, the kings' learning process in the first part of the Book of Daniel, going beyond generations, comes to closure. After three generations, the warlords and persecutors have become “promoters” of Israel's God. As witnesses of God's acting to deliver, and based on their own experiences, they have built up a relationship with the living God and can praise and extol this God. In doing so, they use their function as multipliers in their role as kings of many peoples, and they become the mouthpiece of the One God who delivers and liberates. Now all peoples can find out about this God.

In my own history of reading the Book of Daniel, this “catholic horizon” of the Book of Daniel has grown close to my heart. I see therein the courageous witness of a minority that does not only stand up for its own interests, but also initiates a learning process among the majority. Something like this does not happen without a price. Dialog brings risks with it, and it needs resources – for example to translate one’s own thinking into the other’s world of thought and language. The person who enters into dialog also risks being changed through it.

These experiences mark the Book of Daniel, but for many years they have also been tested year after year in the protected space of the Jewish-Christian Bible Week.

Today, we are living in a world in which for a long time *the* majority and *the* minority has no longer existed. Rather, we live in multiple and complex minority situations. The requirements with which the dialogs of our day are faced are great. The Book of Daniel is able to connect Jewish minority experience with a catholic, worldwide horizon – and this in a tongue-in-cheek, light-footed and charming way. I am glad that we can discover this encouraging book in dialog with one another.

Translation: Sr Katherine Wolff nds

Gefördert durch:



Bundesministerium
des Innern
und für Heimat

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE
LANDESKIRCHE HANNOVERS 

 Bistum
Osnabrück

aufgrund eines Beschlusses
des Deutschen Bundestages