

The Right Side of History. Daniel 2

'The wrong side of history'

As a society we are interested in the future, oriented towards it, trying to anticipate it. We make projections of population growth for town planning, make investment decisions on what might happen to property prices and interest rates, policy decisions on what will happen to the climate, lockdown decisions on projections of viral spread.

We are constantly making decisions in the present based on what we think will happen in the future.

And some are convinced that they know the direction of the future, the direction of human history. You might remember from the debate on same sex marriage, or hear in the current discussion of climate change, accusations of people being on the wrong side of history. For example The Australian reported in 2013

'Australian Greens MP Adam Bandt said Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott - both of whom oppose gay marriage - risked being on the wrong side of history.' Australian Feb 7, 2013

["those cultural warriors who have found themselves on the wrong side of history will withdraw from the battlefield," SMH2017 Tony Walker]

Those who speak like this suggest history has an 'ongoing natural progress towards' liberty or sexual emancipation or moral enlightenment, and those who oppose that progress will be seen to be on the wrong side of history, foolishly opposing the inevitable.

So, of course, they should abandon their opposition immediately and get on board or be crushed by history's momentum

It's handy rhetorical ploy. In a society addicted to the idea of progress it labels your opponents as outmoded, old fashioned, those who will be left behind.

It justifies your own repudiation of the past, and it frees you from criticism of your desired advance and engagement with the reasons people oppose you – you can dismiss them because their opposition is futile for you are on the right side of history, and they are on the wrong side.

It is also a highly questionable view of history and of moral progress in particular. Moral progress is not inevitable. It comes about through individual decisions and hard choices. And history does not make inevitable progress in the one direction. Do we want to think of the current global increase in authoritarian governments as inevitable progress? What of the increase in family breakdown – is lifelong faithfulness on the wrong side of history?

And it also involves a claim about the future, a kind of prophecy – it says this is where history will end up. Can they know that? Isn't the future by definition unknowable with certainty.

What do you need to know the unknowable?

The sun may come up with regularity, the seasons roll around – but we do not know what they will bring.

Our personal futures are full of uncertainty – will I trip, like Czech player Petra Kvitova, leaving a press conference and have to withdraw from competition; plan for retirement, resign your job, and then the GFC comes and you are working a couple more years; will I get sick the day before exams, or that team selection trial. How will that change my life? Or will my holiday plans be scuttled by a new covid case. So many uncertainties

And so are the affairs of nations. Will our export markets be cut off? Will we be caught up in a conflict? Will a changing climate destroy our prosperity?

Who can know the unknowable?

Who can know what is the right or wrong side of history?

Daniel 2 has a lot to say about what you need to know the unknowable.

That is because at its heart is the King's dreams, which, like the future, are ordinarily unknowable, inaccessible to others as the wise men protest.

And also because the king's dream, as we heard, concerns the future – Daniel makes known the unknowable by the unknowable

And what we will see in Daniel is that to know the future, to have sure knowledge of the ordinarily unknowable, you need three things

You need wisdom from God, which can only come through relationship with God and revelation from God.

Let's look at these

You need wisdom from God Daniel 2:1-13

Daniel 2: In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams that troubled him, and sleep deserted him.² So the king gave orders to summon the magicians, mediums, sorcerers, and Chaldeans to tell the king his dreams. When they came and stood before the king,³ he said to them, "I have had a dream and am anxious to understand it."

⁴ *The Chaldeans spoke to the king (Aramaic begins here): "May the king live forever. Tell your servants the dream, and we will give the interpretation."*

Setting the scene vv. 1-4

Verses 1-4 set the scene. Dreams were important in ancient societies, understood as a way gods or spirits could communicate with people to warn or direct. We see that with Pharaoh's dreams in Genesis. [This was pre-Freud and so they weren't just thought of as the expressions of our subconscious.]

And so dreams and their interpretation were part of the study of the professional class of wise men, the group summoned in verse 2 *magicians, mediums, sorcerers, and Chaldeans* – professional advisers found in every royal court, listed by their sub specialties. They had dream books containing a record of past dreams and their interpretation to guide the interpretation of new dreams, books which taught the interpreter to look for certain themes and motifs which had an accepted meaning.

They come at the king's summons and proceed as usual – 'tell us the dream, and we will give the interpretation'. That was the way the system worked. You tell us, and we will employ our expertise and years of study to give you the meaning.

But Nebuchadnezzar does not want to play by the rules of the game.

Daniel 2:⁵ The king replied to the Chaldeans, "My word is final: If you don't tell me the dream and its interpretation, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be made a garbage dump."

Nebuchadnezzar's reasonable unreasonableness

He demands that they tell him the dream itself, and then the interpretation.

The professionals think this entirely unreasonable, think perhaps the king has misunderstood, and so v. 7 ask again to be told the dream.

And now we start to see the reason behind Nebuchadnezzar's unreasonable request.

¹⁸ *The king replied, "I know for certain you are trying to gain some time, because you see that my word is final. ⁹ If you don't tell me the dream, there is one decree for you. You have conspired to tell me something false or fraudulent until the situation changes. So tell me the dream and I will know you can give me its interpretation."*]

He distrusts them, thinks they will tell him anything and rely on the passing of time for things to change or the king to forget.

He wants certainty, to know they can give a true interpretation – and so they must tell him the dream.

He wants to be able to check their truthfulness against something he knows – the dream - before he accepts what they say about something he does not know – the interpretation.

And it is reasonable to test someone's trustworthiness before you believe what they say, especially about the unknown future.

And it is a reasonable test. The dream comes from the gods, and so the true interpretation can only come from the gods. If they have access to the gods for true interpretation – and if they don't how can they claim they know what the dream means – well, they would have access to the source of the dream as well.

The Professional protest

What seems reasonable to the King the wise men protest is completely unreasonable

¹⁰ *The Chaldeans answered the king, "No one on earth can make known what the king requests. Consequently, no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked anything like this of any magician, medium, or Chaldean. ¹¹ What the king is asking is so difficult that no one can make it known to him except the gods, whose dwelling is not with mortals."*]

No one on earth can know what the king wants them to tell him.

That kind of knowledge belongs v. 11 to the gods, the source of the dreams – and you can't go knocking on their door to ask them – 'their dwelling is not with mortals.'

Up till now every one has accepted that. It is unreasonable to expect us to give an interpretation without giving us the data to interpret.

They concede what the king feared. They don't really know. Their interpretations are guesses – and he is angry

They are useless – and they are defying his commands – they are to be executed.

But they speak an important truth to us.

There are some things unknowable to humans. There are real limits to human understanding, and certainty about some things, like dreams, or the future, is not possible.

We are left, as they were left with their dream books, with probabilities, with may be's, based on experience, the interpretation of the past, of history.

To know for sure what is unknowable, you need wisdom, not from books and study, but from the source. For them, that was the gods. For us, it is the living God.

And that would mean having a relationship with God, having access to God, an access to the gods of Babylon they did not have.

You need relationship with God Daniel 2:14-24

[Daniel 2: ¹⁴ Then Daniel responded with tact and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king's guard, who had gone out to execute the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁵ He asked Arioch, the king's officer, "Why is the decree from the king so

harsh?" Then Arioch explained the situation to Daniel. ¹⁶ So Daniel went and asked the king to give him some time, so that he could give the king the interpretation.]

A wise man

Now Daniel and his friends get caught up in this purge, but unlike the Babylonian wise men who only provoke the king's anger further Daniel shows he is really wise v. 14.

He doesn't inflame the situation. He answers Arioch with 'tact and discretion' the soft answer of Proverbs that turns away wrath.

And he acts with confidence in God v. 16– he seeks time but is confident he can bring the dream and its interpretation. Daniel has faith in God, and by faith has a relationship with the God who can be called upon, who can reveal mysteries.

Returning to his house he and his believing friends turn to their God, seeking mercy and the granting of knowledge of the King's mystery.

And in his praise of God for granting their prayer, in revealing the mystery, we see the God Daniel turned to.

*Daniel 2: May the name of God
be praised forever and ever,
for wisdom and power belong to him.
²¹ He changes the times and seasons;
he removes kings and establishes kings.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those
who have understanding.
²² He reveals the deep and hidden things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and light dwells with him.
²³ I offer thanks and praise to you,
God of my ancestors,
because you have given me
wisdom and power.
And now you have let me know
what we asked of you,
for you have let us know
the king's mystery.*

The God Daniel turns to vv. 20-23

He is the God v. 28 of his ancestors, the God of Israel who had called them into covenant relationship with Himself. Wisdom and power, the two things this chapter is most concerned with, belong to Him.

Power, for as the living and only God He rules human history – *He changes times and seasons* – that is determines the eras and epochs of history, ending one dynasty, exalting another.

And wisdom. He is the source of all wisdom and knowledge

*He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those
who have understanding.*

All true knowledge comes from Him.

And He can see where our vision cannot penetrate, make known what is unknowable to us,

²² *He reveals the deep and hidden things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and light dwells with him.*

Having wisdom and power he can give it to His servants, His faithful people, and Daniel v.28 praises him for giving him wisdom and power.

Daniel's God is almighty, all knowing, and near to His people – and so He can make known, reveal, what is unknowable to us.

You need revelation from God Daniel 2:25-45

The origin of Daniel's knowledge vv. 26-30

Having had the mystery revealed to him Daniel goes to the King with the interpretation of his dream, and in the process saves those wise men of Babylon whose wisdom could not save themselves.

Confident in his knowledge he responds to the King's question *"Are you able to tell me the dream I had and its interpretation?"*

by making clear the source of this knowledge is not in himself, in his own wisdom and insight.

"No wise man, medium, magician, or diviner is able to make known to the king the mystery he asked about. ²⁸ But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has let King Nebuchadnezzar know what will happen in the last days.

This knowledge does not reside with people – not just because it came in a dream, but because it concerns the future – what will happen in the last days

God alone can reveal what the King wants and needs to know, and He is now revealing it through Daniel so the King might know it.

God is the source of the dream, and God alone can reveal its interpretation with certainty, can alone reveal the future with certainty.

Daniel now recounts the King's dream, giving the king assurance of the interpretation that followed.

[Daniel 2:³¹ *"Your Majesty, as you were watching, suddenly a colossal statue appeared. That statue, tall and dazzling, was standing in front of you, and its appearance was terrifying. ³² The head of the statue was pure gold, its chest and arms were silver, its stomach and thighs were bronze, ³³ its legs were iron, and its feet were partly iron and partly fired clay. ³⁴ As you were watching, a stone broke off without a hand touching it, struck the statue on its feet of iron and fired clay, and crushed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the fired clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were shattered and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors. The wind carried them away, and not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.]*

The Dream vv. 31-35

It was a dream of an awesome statue, composed of a succession of material varying in value and strength. But the focus is on the end, the stone which human hands had not touched, which strikes the statue and reduces it to chaff and grew to fill the whole earth.

It was a disturbing dream – and Daniel proceeds to give its interpretation, its meaning, what God is revealing to the King through the dream.

The interpretation vv. 36-45

There has been a lot of ink spilled trying to identify each kingdom spoken of with specific kingdoms and empires in history – for example the Babylonian, Persian, Greek – the empire of Alexander and his successors, and the Roman.

That kind of identification also involves the interpretation of chapters 7 and 8, 10 and 11.

But step back to try and hear the interpretation as Nebuchadnezzar would first hear it, and as Daniel's readers would have first heard it. When you do that you see the emphasis falls on the first kingdom, the fourth, and the end.

*Daniel 2:*³⁶ *"This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation.* ³⁷ *Your Majesty, you are king of kings. The God of the heavens has given you sovereignty, power, strength, and glory.* ³⁸ *Wherever people live—or wild animals, or birds of the sky—he has handed them over to you and made you ruler over them all. You are the head of gold.*

Firstly Nebuchadnezzar is the head of gold. We might be puzzled by this emphasis on Nebuchadnezzar as we have seen many empires come and go. But this is not flattery.

It reflects Nebuchadnezzar's importance in God's purposes.

N is the first pagan king to rule Israel, to control their destiny. With Nebuchadnezzar the history of the people of God is caught up into world history, the rise and fall of empires. And Daniel makes clear that his triumph and splendour are the gift of God, just as subsequent chapters will make clear he is subject to God's rule.

³⁷ *Your Majesty, you are king of kings. The God of the heavens has given you sovereignty, power, strength, and glory.*

As the head of gold the lessons the LORD teaches Nebuchadnezzar will be true for all human kings, and in Nebuchadnezzar his people learn the truth of the Lord's sovereignty over them all. No following king can be no greater than he.

Then we have a succession of 'inferior' kingdoms culminating in the fourth who had feet of iron mixed with clay.

³⁹ *"After you, there will arise another kingdom, inferior to yours, and then another, a third kingdom, of bronze, which will rule the whole earth.* ⁴⁰ *A fourth kingdom will be as strong as iron; for iron crushes and shatters everything, and like iron that smashes, it will crush and smash all the others.* ⁴¹ *You saw the feet and toes, partly of a potter's fired clay and partly of iron—it will be a divided kingdom,*

That succession speaks of the impermanence of earthly kingdoms and empires. Each in its turn may look so strong, look like they are here forever – even believe that about themselves – but they will pass.

And in the fourth kingdom God reveals the frailty inherent in earthly power. It is strong, but it has weakness within it, in its very makeup. It is unable to forge the unity that can sustain it. But before it collapses under the weight of its own instability our attention is directed to the rock which no human hand has touched.

⁴⁴ *"In the days of those kings, the God of the heavens will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, and this kingdom will not be left to another people. It will crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, but will itself endure forever.* ⁴⁵ *You saw a stone break off from the mountain without a hand touching it, and it crushed the iron, bronze, fired clay, silver, and gold. The great God has told the king what will happen in the future. The dream is certain, and its interpretation reliable."*

The end, the goal, of history is revealed.

It does not come from within history, but from outside. There is no historical necessity, no inevitable progress to this goal. Its arrival is unknowable from history, not able to be predicted on the basis of past experience, neither evolution nor devolution.

It is the free act of God establishing His kingdom Himself.

A kingdom for God's people, enduring forever.

It will have no rivals, no competitors. And its coming will mean the end of independent human rule. Their power will be gone forever, leaving no trace.

God's people know the end of history, and as we will see – they know what cannot be known for sure, not because they have been told, like Nebuchadnezzar, the unknowable, been assured of the truth of Daniel's interpretation by being told first the dream, but because they have seen the beginning of its fulfilment in the ministry, death and rising of the Lord Jesus.

But Nebuchadnezzar does not know he has been told the truth, that he had been given the interpretation of his dream from God by God. He is more impressed with the fact of the interpretation than its content.

[Daniel 2:⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell facedown, worshiped Daniel, and gave orders to present an offering and incense to him. ⁴⁷ The king said to Daniel, "Your God is indeed God of gods, Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, since you were able to reveal this mystery." ⁴⁸ Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many generous gifts. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and chief governor over all the wise men of Babylon. ⁴⁹ At Daniel's request, the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to manage the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.]

The outcome vv. 46-49

A pagan, believing that heaven was populated by many gods, he acknowledges v. 46 and honours Daniel as a messenger of the supreme God, the God of gods, who is also the Lord of history, the Lord of Kings.

He confesses power and wisdom belong to Daniel's god as Daniel had said, and he showers gifts on Daniel and rewards him with a pre-eminent place in his bureaucracy.

In so doing he sets the scene for the chapters that follow by exposing Daniel and his friends to the jealousy of those whose lives God in his mercy has saved through Daniel.

Daniel – wise because He has a relationship with the living God and relies on the revelation of God – is vindicated. You could say he finds himself, at least for now, on the right side of history.

The right side of history [Colossians 2:3, 6-7, Revelation 1:17-18; Matthew 13:31-33, 24-30, 47-50; Daniel 12:1-3]

Human knowledge is limited. Limited by our own embodied finiteness. There are some things we cannot know.

Perhaps one day, with functional MRI's and brain mapping we may be able to penetrate dreams.

But we will never know the future with certainty

All we can do is make predictions based on our knowledge of the past. Yet our knowledge of the past and of chains of causation is never comprehensive. Have we selected the right variables, made the right assumptions? All we can have are probabilities and may be's.

More. God can act within history from outside history. He is not subject to our modelling. He can come amongst us as man, bring life from death even as He brought something from nothing.

To know the unknowable future with certainty

To know the end of history, who will be on the right or wrong side of history

We need the wisdom of God, God who is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end, who knows all things.

We need the wisdom of God found in relationship with God through the revelation of God.

All we need in Christ

And that is what we have in the Lord Jesus Christ who can say of Himself, as He said to John,

Revelation 1:¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid. I am the First and the Last,¹⁸ and the Living One. I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades.

He knows it all, and He decides where people stand at the end.

That is one reason Paul says all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ

Colossians 2:³ In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

In Him we have relationship with God, and we have received the revelation of God.

Trusting Him we can be amongst the wise, like Daniel, who are on the right side of history.

And in the gospel we see that in Jesus we have confirmed the end of history, that Kingdom Daniel spoke of.

The kingdom of heaven is at the heart of Jesus' ministry. He takes up Daniel's vision and says that Kingdom is near. In His ministry, in His presence it has already erupted into history.

He teaches us how even now it is filling the earth

Matthew 13:³¹ He presented another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field.³² It's the smallest of all the seeds, but when grown, it's taller than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the sky come and nest in its branches."

³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until all of it was leavened."

And He teaches us of its end, the day when all evil is removed.

Matthew 13:⁴⁷ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea. It collected every kind of fish,⁴⁸ and when it was full, they dragged it ashore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but threw out the worthless ones.⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out, separate the evil people from the righteous,⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That kingdom does not come through human effort, from human possibility. Nor is it predicted by human wisdom

Rather it comes from what Paul says 'No eye has seen, no hear has heard, and no human heart has conceived' 1 Cor. 2:9 [Is. 52:15]

It is established by the power and wisdom of God revealed in the death on the cross of our Lord Jesus , a kingdom, a reign, no human power can rival or overthrow.

Live wisely

Who will, in the end, be seen to be on the right side of history?

Those who are wise by receiving the revelation of God, those who conform their life now to the end, the goal of history, the goal to which the living God, the God of gods, is moving all history, and will bring by His own mighty work – the establishment of His reign over all, when all sin and wickedness will be removed and human pride no more

The goal which He has revealed to be certain in the ministry and resurrection of His Son Jesus.

That means if you are not yet a believer in Jesus

You need to get right with Him so you are ready to meet Him.

You can only get right with Him by listening to Him

Whoever else you are listening to, whatever assurances they are giving you about the future, are just their guesses. They cannot know what they cannot know.

But God who knows the future says now is the time to turn back to Him, to be ready for the end of history by trusting in the Lord Jesus now in history, believing what He says, calling upon Him for mercy.

Know more – get in touch

But if you are a believer, knowing only God can make known the unknowable and seeing the end of history in the establishment of the kingdom of heaven is an encouragement to keep living wisely by keeping on trusting Jesus. As Paul says

⁶ So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, ⁷ being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.

Don't be unsettled by those who suggest that Christian faith and life are on the wrong side of history, will inevitably be steamrolled by what they see as progress, and who call you to abandon loyalty to Jesus to get on board the irreversible flow of human history towards their vision of the good life.

They claim to know what they cannot know, for history's end does not come from within history.

Only God knows, and God has revealed, and God will bring the glorious kingdom of His Son

So keep being wise, living in relationship with the living God through believing the gospel of His Son Jesus, confessing Him Lord, and having your future informed by the revelation of God

That way, like Daniel

You will save lives – by making the revelation known

You will bring acknowledgement of the goodness of the wisdom of God by the quality of your life

You will come to share in the future of the wise, the future revealed to Daniel

Daniel 12: At that time Michael, the great prince who stands watch over your people, will rise up.

There will be a time of distress such as never has occurred since nations came into being until that time. But at that time all your people who are found written in the book will escape.

² Many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to disgrace and eternal contempt.

³ Those who have insight will shine like the bright expanse of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.