Resist the King! The Attitude Toward the Emperor
in Bel and the Dragon and Daniel 1–6

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My friendship with Jack Elliott goes back more than fifty years, when he was in his last year and I was in my first at Concordia Seminary. We both later taught at Concordia, though not at the same time. A number of mutual friends and frequent conversations at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Catholic Biblical Association nourished our friendship.

In his magisterial commentary on 1 Peter (Elliott 2000: 401, 494), Jack reflects on the epistle’s attitude toward the emperor: ‘Be subordinate to every human creature because of the Lord, whether to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do what is wrong or to praise those who do what is right. . . . Honor everyone; love the brotherhood; revere God; honor the emperor’ (1 Pet. 2.13-14, 17). Jack notes that the Petrine author’s view of civil government stands midpoint between the thoroughly positive position of Paul and the entirely negative view of the author of Revelation, who depicts civil authorities as agents of Satan. In the view of 1 Peter’s author, subordination is obligatory not because the emperor is divine or a minister of God but because he, like all creatures, deserves respect from subordinates. Christians can show such respect when it does not impinge on the reverence that is due to God alone. It is a pleasure to contribute to this Festschrift an essay that deals with a far different attitude to a king or emperor than that in 1 Peter: that of the apocryphal work known as Bel and the Dragon.

Preserved in two Greek versions (Old Greek and Theodotion), Bel and the Dragon was probably written originally in a Semitic language, and may have been composed in Jerusalem in the first quarter of the second century BCE (Collins 1993: 418). According to the Old Greek version, Daniel was a priest. In both translations he is designated as a ‘companion’ to the king. The real name of the author of the book of Daniel and Bel and the Dragon is unknown but the legendary character who is featured in the Danielic literature is possibly based on Ezek. 14.14, where Noah, Daniel and Job are
paragons of righteousness, or on Ezek. 28.3, where the prophet says of the
king of Tyre, ‘You are indeed wiser than Daniel’.1

The Depiction of the King in Bel and the Dragon

A major theme of Bel and the Dragon is its polemic against idolatry, and
specifically against the god Bel (vv. 1-22) and a divine dragon2 (vv. 23-27),
both of whom are exposed as frauds by Daniel and come to ignominious
ends. While any discussion of Bel and the Dragon must deal with the issue
of idolatry, our major attention will be on another major theme: the naïveté
of the king, his inability to stand up to those who oppose him, the fickleness
of his decisions and his easy resort to excessive violence toward any who
disagree with him. In Theodotion the king is identified in v. 1 as Cyrus, but
that name is not repeated in the rest of the narrative, and in the Old Greek
the king is anonymous throughout. The author of Bel and the Dragon pro-
vides a caricature of this imperial ruler and subtly urges resistance to such
a foreign king that is similar in many ways to the attitude toward the king
in Daniel 1–6. The two themes have much in common. The polemic against
idolatry does not arise from the fear that the faithful might succumb to the
worship of ‘other gods’,3 but as part of the anti-empire message throughout
the book. Just as the king is exposed as a brutal and vacillating weakling,
so the gods of the empire have as shaky a claim on authority and power as
the empire itself does.

The King in the Story of Bel

The king in Bel and the Dragon revered the voracious Bel and went every
day to worship it (v. 4). According to Theodotion, the Babylonians provided
twelve bushels of choice flour, forty sheep and six measures of wine to the
god Bel on a daily basis.4 The king sharply criticized Daniel for remaining
true to his God, and the king was convinced that Bel was alive 5 since this
idol ate and drank much every day. In Theodotion Daniel laughed at the

1. All biblical and apocryphal translations are from the NRSV.
2. In this article I use the traditional name ‘dragon’ whereas Collins (1993: 406,
3. Moore 1977: 127 says that the primary purpose of this book was to ridicule pagan-
ism.
4. In the Old Greek the Babylonians provided twelve bushels of choice flour, but
only four sheep. Excessive meat eating was frowned on in antiquity. The liquid contribu-
tion of the priests in the Old Greek was six measures of oil instead of wine, but in vv. 15
and 21 wine is mentioned.
5. See the references to the living God in Dan. 6.20, 26.
gullible king, causing him to lose his temper. Daniel insisted that Bel was only clay inside and bronze outside and did not really eat or drink anything. The king immediately proposed a contest to determine whether Bel was alive, and the losing side in the contest—the seventy priests of Bel or Daniel—would face execution. If the priests of Bel could not show who was eating the provision they would die, but if they proved that Bel was in fact eating the provisions, Daniel would die (vv. 3-9).

The seventy priests of Bel provided food and wine for Bel, but had left the premises of the temple when Daniel, alone in the presence of the king, scattered ashes throughout the whole temple. Leaving the temple, Daniel and the king shut the door and sealed it with the king’s seal. When Daniel and the king arrived at Bel’s temple the next day, the king asked whether the seals had been broken, and Daniel assured him that they were intact. The king, however, saw that the food was gone and jumped to a false conclusion. The king shouted in triumph and declared: ‘You are great, O Bel, and in you there is no deceit at all!’ (vv. 10-18).

Daniel laughed at the king for the second time (v. 19) and kept the king back from barging into the temple. At Daniel’s urging the king looked at the footprints revealed by the scattered ashes and conceded that these were the footprints of men, women and children who had entered the temple of Bel surreptitiously through secret doors during the night and devoured all the things that had been offered to Bel. The king lost his temper again and executed the priests of Bel and their families. The king who had asked Daniel the day before why he did not worship Bel, and had reaffirmed that Bel was great when he had entered the temple, now turned over his god Bel to Daniel, who destroyed both the idol and its temple. Bel was proved to be false because he could not eat, whereas the priests and their families were executed because they had eaten inappropriately (vv. 19-22).

The King in the Story of the Dragon

The Babylonians had a second deity they revered, which was a great dragon. The king thought he had indeed bested Daniel this time since this

6. In the Apocalypse of Abraham, Abraham’s father, Terah, laughed at the idol Barisat who had caught fire while supposedly tending a cooking fire: ‘I laughed (and) said to myself, “Barisat, truly you know how to light a fire and cook food!” And it came to pass while saying this in my laughter, I saw (that) he burned up slowly from the fire and became ashes’ (Apoc. Abr. 5.10-11).
7. So Theodotion. In the Old Greek they had merely taken the food home.
8. So Theodotion. In the Old Greek the king brought the priests out of the temple and handed them over to Daniel. He also gave Bel’s provisions to Daniel and destroyed Bel himself.
god was clearly alive and therefore should be worshiped by Daniel. Daniel confessed steadfastly that he was an adherent of ‘the Lord my God, for he is the living God’. He asked permission of the king to kill this god, without using standard military weapons. Amazingly, the king naïvely gave Daniel permission to kill the great dragon (vv. 23-26)!

Daniel boiled together several ingredients—pitch, fat and hair—none of them toxic in themselves, and fed them to the dragon, which promptly exploded. Three observations can be made. First, Daniel also will eat a boiled meal in the lions’ den but will survive. Second, the dragon can be compared to the priests of Bel since neither the dragon nor the priests recognized that what they ate could lead to their death. Finally, both Bel and the dragon are proven to be powerless through food.9 The dragon is different from Bel because he can eat, but it is exactly that ability that kills him since the dragon is unable to determine whether the food offered to him is lethal (v. 27).

The Babylonians put pressure on the king and charged: ‘The king has become a Jew; he has destroyed Bel, and killed the dragon, and slaughtered the priests’ (v. 28). Only the fourth charge—slaughtering the priests—can be directly laid at the king’s door. Collins notes that by the end of the book the king has become a monotheist (v. 41), but even then it is not clear that he has become a Jew (Collins 1993: 415).10 The king himself had not destroyed Bel (at least according to Theodotion) nor killed the dragon even though Daniel had. In any case, the Babylonians threatened the king and his household with death unless he would hand over Daniel. The supposedly mighty king gave in to this pressure and handed Daniel over to the Babylonians (vv. 28-30).

The Babylonians promptly threw Daniel into the lions’ den where he stayed for six days. To seal Daniel’s fate his would-be executioners did not give the lions their usual daily fare of two human bodies and two sheep11 so that they would be ravenously hungry and sure to gobble up Daniel.12 The cruelty of the king is again demonstrated in his contributing two humans

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9. For a thorough discussion of the role that the ability or inability to eat plays in Bel and the Dragon, see Bergmann 2004: 262-83.
10. In 2 Macc. 9.17 the dying Antiochus made a vow to the Lord, who no longer had mercy on him, that he would become a Jew and would visit every inhabited place to proclaim the power of God. Earlier he had not allowed Jews to profess themselves to be Jews (2 Macc. 6.6). My use of the word Jew/Jews in this context is dictated by NRSV. I am well aware that Jack Elliott and other scholars consider this term anachronistic before the second century CE.
11. The two sheep are not mentioned in the Old Greek.
12. The Old Greek adds that death by the lions would deprive Daniel of a proper burial.
daily to the lions’ diet. Daniel stayed in this lions’ den for six days without harm (vv. 31-32).

Of course the lions were not the only ones who were hungry in their den. So was Daniel. An angel transported the prophet Habakkuk by the crown of his head from Judea to Babylon. Habakkuk took along with him a stew that he had intended to feed to some reapers. Habakkuk urged Daniel to eat the food that God had sent to him. Daniel ate, and God returned Habakkuk back to Judea. Since the prophet Habakkuk prepared Daniel’s food, he consumed food that had been prepared according to the laws of kashrut and had not been in contact with idol worshipers (Bergmann 2004: 275; vv. 33-39).13

On the seventh day, the king came to the lions’ den to mourn for Daniel. This contrasts with Daniel 6 where the sleepless Darius, who had fasted, hurried to the lions’ den on the very first day because he was worried about the well-being of Daniel. Readers of Bel and the Dragon are bound to ask: ‘Where has the king been for the last week?’ When the fickle king saw that Daniel sat there alive, he shouted out, ‘You are great, O Lord, the God of Daniel, and there is no other besides you’ (v. 41). Only twenty-three verses earlier the king had shouted, ‘You are great, O Bel, and in you there is no deceit at all!’ The king pulled Daniel out of the lions’ den and threw into the den those who had attempted to destroy Daniel. He watched as the lions gobbled them up. Only twelve verses earlier the king had caved before the Babylonians’ demands and given them the right to destroy Daniel. The lions showed remarkable restraint for a week in not eating Daniel, but returned to their ravenous practices when the king’s enemies were thrown into their den (vv. 40-42).

The king was loyal to the ‘gods’ Bel and the great dragon until Daniel exposed them both as frauds. The demise of these idols hints at the precarious hold that the king has on power. At first the king had badly misread the results of Daniel’s attempt to prove that Bel was not a god. And the king was willing to double-cross Daniel by throwing him to the lions to save his own life. His punishments of the priests of Bel and their families and the Babylonians who had accused him of being a Jew were brutal. When Daniel was miraculously spared in the lions’ den, the king acknowledged Daniel’s God and denied that there were any other gods. Can the reader doubt that this king would double-cross Daniel again if he faced political pressure or threats of violence? Would not the reader suspect that the king would renge on his allegiance to Daniel’s God at the first opportunity? The story of Bel and the dragon is devastating in its depiction of the king. The anonymity of the king, except for v. 1, allows him to represent a variety of royal figures whom the postexilic community would have experienced.

13. Compare the controversy over Persian food and drink in Dan. 1.5, 8-16.
The first six chapters of Daniel have often been thought to provide examples of what it means to live faithfully in an alien culture, but they are better understood in my judgment as satirical attacks on the imperial system in general and the king as the embodiment of that imperial arrogance in particular. Satire often uses exaggeration, incongruity, reversal and parody. This strong resistance to the king is mixed with some accommodation to the realities of empire, which distinguishes these chapters from Daniel 7–12.\(^\text{14}\)

The imperial kings in Daniel 1–6 resort easily to violence, repent after manifestations of God’s power and even confess the superiority of Israel’s God, but soon fall back into their disregard for the religious claims of those whom they rule or force them into religiously compromised situations.

Daniel 1

In Daniel 1, we learn that Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Jerusalem was done by the permission of the God of Israel: ‘The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God’ (v. 2). Hence Nebuchadnezzar’s military achievements were not solely his own. When Daniel and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were selected for training as Babylonian bureaucrats, Daniel refused to accept the daily portion of food and wine offered by the king, not so much because it violated the laws of \textit{kashrut}, but apparently because Daniel did not want to accept food offered by the empire. Daniel was resisting hybridity, knowing that you are what you eat.\(^\text{15}\)

His request worried Ashpenaz, the chief of the king’s eunuchs,\(^\text{16}\) who feared that any deterioration in Daniel’s physical condition would lead to violent punishment by the king. That is how ancient emperors were expected to rule. Ashpenaz’s willingness to negotiate with Daniel, however, undercuts some of the power of the king. After living on this special diet for ten days, Daniel and his friends were better and fatter than the Babylonian control group. When the king gave Daniel and his friends their final examination after three years of education, no one was comparable to Daniel, Hananiah,

\(^{14}\) Drawing on the literary methodology of Mikhail Bakhtin, David M. Valeta (Valeta 2005 and 2008) understands the tales in Daniel as Menippean Satires, and reads the depiction of the king in Daniel 1–6 in a similar way to my own understanding.

\(^{15}\) This thought was suggested to me by Carolyn Leeb. She pointed out that hybridity can be syncretic (assimilative) or resistant (parody).

\(^{16}\) See Dan. 1.3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18. The \textit{NRSV} and other English versions identify Ashpenaz as ‘palace master’ or something similar. The importance of understanding the term ‘eunuch’ literally will be discussed by Carolyn Leeb and me in our commentary on Daniel in the Wisdom Commentary Series, forthcoming.
Mishael and Azariah, and they were stationed in the king’s court. They were
ten times better than their competitors. In v. 19 the narrator ignores the
Babylonian names the king’s eunuch had given the four men (v. 6) and calls
them by their Israelite names. The emperor and his officials had tried to
deprive Daniel and his friends of their Israelite identity.

Daniel 2

In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar lost sleep because of a dream he had. The
power of Nebuchadnezzar was thus unmasked by insomnia (see also 6.18)
and an involuntary dream. He made an outrageous demand in v. 2 that
his magicians, enchanters and sorcerers not only interpret the dream, but
tell him also what he had dreamed. His expert assistants greeted him with
this wish: ‘O king, live forever’, even though by the end of the chapter
we learn that not only will Nebuchadnezzar not live forever, but in fact the
Babylonian Empire will be succeeded by three subsequent empires, each
one of lesser value than its predecessor—gold, silver, bronze, iron. Nebu-
chadnezzar underscored his absurd demand by threatening his assistants
with being torn limb from limb and having their houses ruined. The king
accused his assistants of stalling for time (v. 8), even though later he proved
to be inconsistent when he granted Daniel’s own request for additional time
(v. 16). The assistants cut the king down to size when they insisted that no
king has ever made such a request—even kings who were however great
and powerful (v. 10). It seems that Nebuchadnezzar’s assistants did not
place him at such a powerful level, and they insisted that no humans could
ever fulfill such a request to tell a king what he had dreamed.

The king again showed uncontrollable rage and commanded that all his
wise men be executed (v. 12). The king who had promoted the four men at
the end of ch. 1 now gave them the thankless job of executing the king’s

17. ‘In Daniel, however, it is not the dreams of the slaves but the interpretation of
the dreams of the vanquisher by the vanquished that reveals these reveries as messages
from God, and thus indicative of a greater power than earthly empires’ (Valeta 2005:
322).

18. See also Dan. 3.9; 5.10; 6.21.

19. Scholars have long debated why the text of Daniel changes from Hebrew to
Aramaic at 2.4b and does not revert to Hebrew until 8.1. Portier-Young has made the
interesting proposal that the stories of Daniel 1–6 show resistance and accommodation
and that the writers who joined the tales of Daniel 1–6 to the visions of Daniel 7–12
‘made intentional use of two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, to move their audience
from a posture of partial accommodation and collaboration to one of total rejection
of Seleucid hegemony and domination’ (Portier-Young 2011: 227 and Portier-Young
2010). That is, the switch from the language of the empire (Aramaic) to Hebrew, the
age-old language of Israel, marks this definitive transition.
Babylonian assistants. In Daniel’s prayer for help he mentioned that God deposes kings and sets up kings. Their power is only a gift that can also be taken away. Daniel exposed the violent traits of Nebuchadnezzar by ordering the executioner Arioch not to carry out the king’s threat to destroy the wise men of Babylon (v. 26). When Daniel addressed Nebuchadnezzar as ‘king of kings’ (v. 37), the title is more than a little ironic. After all, it is Daniel’s God who has given Nebuchadnezzar all the power and responsibilities he claims. While Daniel assures the king that he is the head of gold in his dream, his kingdom is only one of four successive empires, and he clearly will not live forever. At the end of these kingdoms that will be destroyed by a divinely made stone—one not made by human hands—will come the kingdom of God that will never be destroyed (v. 44).

All pretensions of power by Nebuchadnezzar collapse when he falls on his face and worships Daniel, even commanding that a grain offering and incense be offered to him. The biblical text does not bother to countermand this order since every reader of Daniel will know that no human, not even Daniel, is to be worshiped. Nebuchadnezzar confessed Daniel’s God as God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries (v. 47), all of which seems incongruous. The king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon just after Daniel had announced that Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom was only one of four and that that these kingdoms are doomed and will be replaced by a kingdom set up by God that shall never be destroyed. The king is seemingly so smitten by Daniel that at Daniel’s request he also promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel, the vindicated interpreter, remained at the king’s court where he had been since Dan. 1.19. The king’s favorable attitude toward the four men will soon prove to be a mirage.

**Daniel 3**

Resistance to the king continues to be shown in Daniel 3, where the king is still Nebuchadnezzar but the resisters are Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel does not appear in this chapter, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do not appear after this chapter. Nebuchadnezzar erected a statue of ridiculous proportions, sixty cubits high by six cubits wide, or, in our measurements, ninety feet high and nine feet wide. How would such a statue withstand a windstorm? The king sent out invitations to the satraps, prefects, governors, counselors, treasurers, justices, magistrates and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of this statue. All of these major and minor officials assembled in Dura and were instructed that when they would hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum and the entire musical ensemble, they were to fall down and worship the
golden statue that the king had set up (v. 5). Whoever failed in this obligation would be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire (v. 6).

As the music sounded from all the musical instruments (v. 7; cf. vv. 10, 15), all the peoples, nations and languages fell down in unison and worshiped the golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. There is parody in the repeated listing of musical instruments at whose sound everyone is to worship the king’s statue (see Avalos 1991: 580-88). The sycophantic Chaldeans then played their expected part, expressed a wish that the king would live forever (v. 9) and reported to the king that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego paid no heed to the king, did not serve his gods and did not worship the golden statue that the king had set up. One suspects that their first accusation—that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego paid no heed to the king—was the most egregious in the king’s eyes. One also sees here a critique of the petty infighting among the imperial bureaucrats.

Nebuchadnezzar, as we would expect, again loses his temper (v. 13), and calls Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego on the carpet. The king gave them a choice: when they would hear all the musical instruments again, they could either fall down and worship the statue or be thrown into the fiery furnace. The king mocked their faith in advance: ‘Who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?’ Here he echoes the arrogant taunt of the Rabshakeh of Sennacherib (Isa. 36.19-20; 37.11-12; 2 Kgs 18.33-35; 19.12-13).

The three resisters answered defiantly. They felt no need to make a defense before Nebuchadnezzar. They would be happy if God would deliver them, but even if he could not, they would not serve Nebuchadnezzar’s gods or worship the golden statue he had set up. As Portier-Young observes, ‘[The three young men] trust in God, defy the king’s edict, refuse to worship any God but Yahweh, proclaim their faith out loud and in public, and surrender their bodies to death, not to apostasy’ (Portier-Young 2011: 261). These men give their lives regardless of any reward they might expect. ‘[This story] instills in the persecuted the conviction that acting for their own sake, for God’s, and for one another’s all aim toward the one end of covenant fidelity. Self-sacrifice does not negate this goal but allows them to attain it’ (Portier-Young 2011: 260).

Again, Nebuchadnezzar had problems with anger management. He was so angry in fact that his face was distorted. At his orders the furnace was heated seven times more than was customary. Acting as if throwing people into a fiery furnace was a natural pattern of events, the king in his fury turned up the thermostat. Because the king’s command was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flames killed the men who lifted the three resisters into the furnace.

When the king saw four figures instead of three in the furnace, and the three resisters walking around unbound, he addressed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in v. 26 as ‘servants of the Most High God’. The golden
statue that everyone was to worship or risk death goes unmentioned, and the
king blessed the God of Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego, who had sent
an angel to deliver his servants who trusted in him. The king now decreed
that any people nation or language (v. 29; cf. v. 7) that utters blasphemy
against the God of Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego would be torn limb
from limb and their houses would be ruined. The king is ‘equal opportunity’
on threats. On the other hand, the king promoted Shadrach, Meschach and
Abednego, whom shortly before he had thrown into the fiery furnace. While
his effort to destroy Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego misfired (no pun
intended), his threat to punish brutally any who did not worship their God
says much about the character of emperors.

Daniel 4

Although this chapter is largely a first-person report by Nebuchadnezzar21 in
vv. 1-18 and vv. 34-37, with Daniel referring to the king in the third person
in vv. 19-33, criticism and mockery of the king can be detected throughout
the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar begins with a letter addressed to all peoples,
nations and languages that tells of God’s benefactions to him. Nebuchad-
nezzar had had another dream that frightened and terrified him. When his
professional interpreters could not explain his dream, Daniel, whom the
king addressed by his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, showed up uninvit-
ed.22 He flattered Daniel/Belteshazzar by saying that he was endowed with
a spirit of the holy gods and that no mystery was too difficult for him. The
meaning of the dream he told Daniel is clear enough without any need for
interpretation even though the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans and divin-
ers could not figure it out and the king himself needed all the help he could
get (v. 7). A gigantic tree that provided food for all and a home for birds
and other animals was chopped down by orders of a watcher who had come
from heaven. Clearly the tree represents the king. His provision of food and
shelter does not come from his magnanimity but as a consequence of taking
people from their homelands. The king would now live with the animals
and exchange his human mind for the mind of an animal. This condition,
initiated by the watchers and holy ones, would last for seven years. Its pur-
pose: that all may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom

20. I follow the English verse numbers. Dan. 4.1 is 3.31 in Aramaic, and v. 4 in
English is v. 1 in Aramaic.
21. I agree with the proposal that this story may once have featured Nabonidus
instead of Nebuchadnezzar, but it is the latter king who is unequivocally present in the
final form of the text.
22. The king had apparently forgotten about Daniel’s skill and fidelity after the
dramatic events of Daniel 1–2.
of mortals and would give the kingdom to whomever he chooses. This is quite a comedown for the great king of Babylon. The narrator expresses no anxiety about how the nations will feed and house themselves in the king’s absence.

The king admitted that Daniel was endowed with a spirit of the holy gods, which was a good thing, since all the wise men of Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom could not interpret the dream (v. 18). But the king’s confession is both transitory and shallow. Daniel hesitated to describe the meaning of this dream. His thoughts terrified him—it was not healthy to give bad news to the volatile king—but the king encouraged him to go on. Who could criticize Daniel for what he said in v. 19: ‘My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you, and its interpretation for your enemies!’ After identifying the king with the tree, Daniel talked about the king being great and strong, with his greatness and sovereignty reaching the ends of the earth. But the fate of the king, who would live with the wild animals, has a clear purpose: that the king learn that the Most High, the God of Israel, has sovereignty over human rule and gives such rule to whomever he chooses. The king would regain his kingdom only when he acknowledged that God/Heaven is sovereign. Daniel urged the king to atone for his sins with righteousness and for his iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, that is, to the ones he himself as king has oppressed. Daniel thus gives the king a last minute out: if he would reverse his sinful imperial policies, he could escape divine punishment.

A whole year later Nebuchadnezzar has not gotten the point, but paraded instead on the roof of the palace and said, ‘Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I built by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?’ He is a self-made monarch, and the whole purpose of his state building projects is to garner glory for himself. A heavenly voice instantaneously 23 told Nebuchadnezzar that he had lost the kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar was driven from human society, ate grass like an ox, had his body washed with the dew of heaven, saw his hair grow as long as eagles’ feathers and his nails become like birds’ claws. The king eats like an animal, is homeless despite all his building projects, his appearance is unkempt, and his hands become grotesque. David Valeta believes that the ‘madness’ of Nebuchadnezzar may allude to Antiochus IV and his reputation for madness and erratic behavior (Valeta 2005: 31). In his praise for God after his recovery, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged God’s sovereignty and his freedom to do whatever he chooses. In other words, Nebuchadnezzar regained his kingdom when he admitted he himself had none. Nebuchadnezzar extolled the king of heaven and confessed: his works are truth; his ways are justice; and God is able to bring low those in walk in pride—like emperors, for example.

23. The king’s words were still in his mouth.
The transition to this chapter is abrupt since Belshazzar has become king with no word about Nebuchadnezzar’s death. The new king presided over a banquet with heavy drinking. In a drunken condition the king ordered his servants to bring in the vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Then the king, his lords, his wives and concubines—clearly the listing of his sexual partners is not complimentary—toasted the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone as they drank from the stolen temple vessels.

In the midst of this blasphemous toast a hand began to write on the wall, terrifying the king half to death: ‘Then the king’s face turned pale, and his thoughts terrified him. His limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together’ (Dan. 5.6). The king called for the usual professional interpreters, promising them royal clothing, jewelry and high rank in the kingdom. They failed to interpret, of course, which only caused the king more anxiety: ‘King Belshazzar became greatly terrified and his face turned pale, and his lords were perplexed’. The bureaucrats know perfectly well what the king does to servants who fail to do impossible tasks. At this point the queen mother appeared and said, ‘O king, live forever!’ She recommended Daniel, who was like a person endowed with the spirit of the holy gods, and who had shown godlike wisdom during the reign of Belshazzar’s ‘father’, Nebuchadnezzar. ‘He will give the interpretation’. Belshazzar explained the circumstances to Daniel and offered him the same rewards/bribes that had been offered to the professional interpreters. Daniel refused the gifts but gave Belshazzar his interpretation of the handwriting on the wall anyway. Daniel rehearsed the events of ch. 4, but was much more explicit in the criticism of Nebuchadnezzar: his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he acted proudly. Daniel scolded Belshazzar for not humbling his heart even though he had known all this about his father. Belshazzar himself is accused of exalting himself against the Lord of heaven. He had praised the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood and stone, but the God in whose power was his very breath and to whom belong all his ways, he had not honored.

24. This expression is unclear. Literally translated it refers to the untlying of knots, an idiom also used of Daniel’s solving of problems in vv. 12 and 16. Al Wolters suggests this interpretation of all three passages: ‘My proposal is that v. 5 refers to the king’s panic-stricken loss of sphincter control, and that vv. 12 and 16 are a mocking and ironic allusion to this ignominious incontinence on the king’s part’ (Wolters 1991: 118).

25. Belshazzar was actually the son of Nabonidus, and he never advanced beyond the rank of regent. This is usually identified as one of the many historical errors in Daniel, and so it is. A modern reader, therefore, knows that Belshazzar’s claims to the throne were even more vapid than the author of Daniel did.
The meaning of the Aramaic inscription itself is enigmatic, but Daniel interpreted it to mean that Belshazzar had been weighed and found wanting and that his kingdom would be given to the Medes and Persians. Despite Daniel’s earlier refusal of the king’s gifts, Belshazzar gave Daniel the three gifts anyway. That night Belshazzar was killed, despite the queen mother’s wish earlier in the day that he live forever. Belshazzar was succeeded by (the fictitious) Darius the Mede (see Collins 1993: 30-32).

Daniel 6

Darius appointed Daniel to a new position as one of three presidents to whom the satraps reported, and soon Daniel emerged as the leading president. The other presidents and satraps were jealous of Daniel, but they could find no grounds for complaint against him. They conspired against Daniel to catch him in connection with the law of his God. After the usual wish for a long life, they proposed to Darius that for the next thirty days no one should pray to anyone but the king, and failure to comply would lead to being thrown into the lions’ den. The gullible king is persuaded to issue this brutal edict according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked. This provision will limit the king’s options later.

Daniel knew that this document had been signed (v. 10), but he continued to pray three times a day before an open window, toward Jerusalem. Presumably these prayers were offered out loud, and so his accusers knew that he was praying to someone other than Darius. Daniel sins boldly against the emperor. The conspirators reported this violation to Darius and reminded the king of his previous edict that could not be changed. Legalistic obedience is more important than saving Daniel’s life. The king himself reiterated that such a law of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked. Only when this provision was reiterated did they report Daniel’s prayers, which were a classic case of civil disobedience. Darius made every effort to save Daniel until sunset, but he then caved in to their demands, much as the king did in Bel and the Dragon when his subjects accused him of becoming a Jew. In his moral weakness the king said to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!’ Thus, even as he initiates a death sentence, the king acknowledges that Daniel is innocent. His hope that God would deliver Daniel contradicts his own decree that in this month no one should pray to any god but the king. The entrance to the den was covered and sealed with the king’s seal and the signet of his lords.

26. We are not told by whom the king was killed. By Darius and/or by his forces? The narrator did not know and perhaps did not care.

27. This supposed characteristic of Persian laws is not attested in ancient documents.
The worried king went home, fasted and could not sleep. No ‘diversions’ (NRSV ‘food’) were brought to him, perhaps referring to his usual habit of frolicking with concubines or dancing girls (Collins 1993: 258 n. 48). At daybreak the king rushed to the lions’ den and called anxiously: ‘O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you faithfully serve been able to deliver you from the lions?’ How ironic that Daniel, who was exposed to mortal danger because of his civil disobedience is credited with faithful service to the God to whom he had been praying. After wishing that the king might live forever, Daniel reported that God had sent an angel and shut the lions’ mouths. Daniel affirmed that he had been found blameless before God and had done no wrong to the king. The king was very glad about the fate of Daniel, but ordered that the conspirators, their wives and children be thrown into the lions’ den. One can perhaps understand his pique toward Daniel’s accusers, but his most brutal self is revealed when he also executes their wives and children. Before these folks hit the bottom of the den, they were overpowered by the lions, who broke in pieces all their bones. It was no accident that the lions had no appetite for Daniel.

Darius now made another decree directly opposite to his earlier decree that supposedly could not be revoked, but now is changed. He ordered that people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, who is living and who endures forever. God’s kingdom will never be destroyed. This God had saved Daniel from the power of the lions. Daniel maintained his faithfulness even when that would expose him to capital punishment. But this chapter also portrays the king as easily fooled by his staff, and as a ruler who fails to act for the safety of Daniel even when he knew that Daniel was in the right. Darius affirmed that Daniel has served his God faithfully. When the king’s foolish decree and justice collided, Darius opted for his foolish decree. His verdict on the conspirators was just but brutal: he also executed their wives and children.

**Conclusion**

I believe that previous commentators have underplayed the sharp critique of imperial powers that appears throughout the seven chapters of Bel and the Dragon and Daniel 1–6. Bergmann speaks of the positive attitude of Bel and the Dragon’s author toward foreign rulers and uses this argument to date the apocryphal work before the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (Bergmann 2004: 265; cf. Collins 2000: 418, who also speaks about the sympathetic portrayal of the king in this chapter). On the contrary, the author of Daniel 6 portrays a king as brutal as Antiochus and who clearly knows better than to try to

28. This is the only time in Daniel that this expression is spoken by an Israelite.
execute Daniel. The tales in Daniel 1–6 are as critical of the empire as the visions in chs. 7–12. Who is more evil, the little horn who speaks arrogant things in Daniel 7 or the whole series of kings who observe the good character of Daniel and his friends time after time, but yield to every kind of political pressure or naively accept bureaucratic calumny against them. Perhaps the tales of Daniel 1–6 are older than the visions of Daniel 7–12, but the usual reason for affirming that has been called into question since their main burden does not seem to be instruction on how to live faithfully in a foreign context, but rather an exposé of the pretentions of imperial power.

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29. Collins 2000: 418, argues that the identification of Daniel as a priest in Bel and the Dragon, in contradiction to Daniel 1, suggests a date before Daniel mt had become authoritative.