

THE DECREE OF DARIUS THE MEDE IN DANIEL 6

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In the sixth chapter of Daniel we find Daniel brought, apparently out of retirement, into a high position in the newly established Persian rule of Babylon. As one of three commissioners over the 120 satraps Daniel enjoys the confidence and trust of Darius the Mede, named as the ruler of the empire. This also makes him the object of the jealousy of his colleagues and eventually embroils him in a political power play of some sort.

The hinge of the story, though certainly not its purpose or main point, is the decree that Darius was convinced to issue. This decree was used as an instrument of Daniel's enemies as they attempted to depose and destroy him. It is the nature of that decree that is the subject of this investigation.

The decree itself reads: "Anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lion's den" (Dan 6:7 *NASB*). A few observations that can be made are as follows: (1) Darius apparently did not consider Daniel as having violated whatever it was that he had intended to prohibit. The act that he was prohibiting must have been considered serious since it carried the death penalty, yet the king sought for ways to free Daniel (v 14). (2) Daniel did not consider himself to have violated the spirit of the decree because he claims that he has committed no crime before the king (v 22). Certainly the violation of a decree of the king would have been a crime. (3) While the narrator is careful to tell us that Daniel's continuing of his practice was not in ignorance of the decree (v 10), we cannot be sure that Daniel would have considered his practice a violation of the decree. We are not told how much Daniel was aware of the plot against him.

Conclusions from these observations would lead us to suspect that when the decree was presented to Darius for his approval and promulgation there was a certain viable and beneficial objective that the decree was presented as having that was persuasive to Darius. Judging by his and Daniel's reactions, it seems unlikely that it was actually intended to outlaw the practice that Daniel was engaged in. The nature of the ploy of Daniel's enemies was that they were able to employ sufficiently ambiguous wording so that Daniel could be prosecuted though Darius would never have considered his prayers a violation. This leads us to examine what it was that the decree intended to establish or prohibit.

I. THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF THE DECREE

The commentators generally fall into two categories, very closely related, concerning the intent of the decree issued by Darius. The first view is that the

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king actually did declare himself the only deity that could be worshiped for a period of thirty days. Most commentators acknowledge that this is very unlike the Persian kings. From there the conservative commentators seek to suggest that, despite irregularities, such behavior can be explained.¹ Critical scholars, believing Daniel to be a product of the second century B.C., view the decree as anachronistic, reflecting more accurately rulers such as Antiochus Epiphanes.

A decree of such a nature, which would make the king the only lawfully worshipped deity for a month, has no parallel in history, certainly not in the time of the tolerant rulers of the Persian empire.²

The decree which the plotters persuaded the king to issue, even if it be regarded as referring only to cultic prayer, does not make the impression of belonging to the real world and is to be regarded as no more historical than Darius the Mede himself. It has the advantage, moreover, of suggesting to the reader the hybris and intolerance of the hellenistic kings.³

The second view of the decree sees it not as actually deifying the king but as designating him as the only legitimate representative of deity for the stated time. Montgomery⁴ supports Behrman's suggestion that the implication of the narrative is that the prohibited petition refers to "petitions of religion" so that for the stated time the king was to be seen as the only representative of deity.

Keil is of the same mind when he accepts the analysis of Kliefoth, which he quotes as follows:

The object of the law was only to bring about the general recognition of the principle that the king was the living manifestation of all the gods, not only of the Median and Persian, but also of the Babylonian and Lydian, and all the gods of the conquered nations. All the nations subjected to the Medo-Persian kingdom were required not to abandon their own special worship rendered to their gods, but in fact to acknowledge that the Medo-Persian world-ruler Darius was also the son and representative of their national gods. For this purpose they must for the space of thirty days present their petitions to their national gods only in him as their manifestation.⁵

Wilson keeps both options open when he comments concerning the decree:

This may or may not imply that the king himself, or any of his subjects, considered Darius to be a god. It certainly prohibits one and all from praying to anyone for, or asking from anyone, anything, except from the king, leaving aside the question as to the belief of the person praying.⁶

¹E.g., J. Baldwin, *Daniel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 128.

²Hartmann and DiLella, *Daniel* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1978) 198.

³N. Porteous, *Daniel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 89.

⁴J. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1927) 270.

⁵Keil and Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1973) 211.

⁶R. D. Wilson, *Studies in the Book of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1979), 1. 312-313.

II. PROBLEMS SURROUNDING THE DECREE

The first difficulty comes as we consider the great risk that would be involved in prohibiting prayer to all deities. Within a general polytheistic setting, this would be sheer madness.

The Indo-Iranians believed not only in beneficent gods and spirits but in a number of hostile supernatural beings and malignant spirits. To avert the threats to human life posed by these inimical hosts, acts of propitiation, ritual incantations, banning formulas, and appeals to the benevolent deities were practiced.⁷

Furthermore,

it is the common practice among . . . Iranians . . . to devote each sacrifice to a particular deity, who is called down by name, with the proper ritual words, in order to hear the praises offered him and to receive the gifts of his worshippers. Thus in the hymn to Aredvi Sura the goddess is invoked: "Because of this sacrifice, because of this prayer . . . come down, Aredvi Sura Anahita, from those stars above to the Ahura-created earth, to the sacrificing priest, to the overflowing, hollowed hand, that you may aid him who, devout, brings you offerings. . . ." Many boons, it is said, were sought of this goddess. "Brave warriors will ask of you swift horses and the supremacies of fortune. Priests who recite . . . will ask of you wisdom and holiness. . . . Maidens will ask of you a strong master in the house. Women giving birth will ask of you an easy delivery. And all these things you, having power, will grant them."⁸

So we can see that petitionary prayer was a required and regular aspect of Iranian worship. Within pure Zoroastrianism prayer was also an essential element.

In his own teachings Zoroaster associated fire with one of the great divinities of his revelation, Aša ("Righteousness" or "Order"), and his followers were enjoined to pray always in its presence—either turned towards the sun or at their own hearths—the better to fix their thoughts on Aša and the virtue thus represented.⁹

It is apparent that Zoroastrianism was not practiced in its pure form by the Achaemenid kings but in a syncretized form. But this only increased the need for the shrines and worship of the various pagan deities to be maintained.¹⁰ Darius the Great prays not only to Ahura Mazda but to all the gods to keep enemy hordes, famine and the "Lie" away from the empire.¹¹

Prayer was essential for evil forces to be held at bay. It was a requirement in the practice of even a syncretized Zoroastrianism that, even if not practiced by Darius the Mede, would have been practiced by a large majority of Medes

⁷Cambridge History of Iran (hereafter CHI), 3. 347.

⁸M. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 1. 151.

⁹M. Boyce, "On the Zoroastrian Temple Cult of Fire," *JAOS* 95 (1975) 454-465.

¹⁰CHI, 2. 680.

¹¹R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (New York: Putnam, 1961) 156.

and Persians. Pagan Iranian custom required prayer three times a day, just as Daniel practiced. Zoroaster increased the number to five for his followers.

The five daily prayers were a binding duty on every Zoroastrian, part of his necessary service to God, and a weapon in the fight against evil. . . . He prays to Ahura Mazda, [and] execrates Angra Mainyu. . . . The whole observance takes only a few minutes, but its regular repetition is a religious exercise of the highest value, constituting both a steady discipline and a regular avowal of the fundamental tenets of the faith.¹²

One of the primary prayers used daily can be seen to be of a petitionary nature:

May longed-for Airyaman come to the help of the men and women of Zoroaster, to the help of their good intention. The conscience which deserves the desirable recompense, for it I ask the longed-for reward for righteousness, which Ahura Mazda will measure out.¹³

Thus for Darius the Mede to decree even a temporary end to prayer would be unenforceable and politically suicidal, for he would be prohibiting the religious practice of every Iranian.

Furthermore the neglect of the gods in a polytheistic setting was particularly foolhardy. Cyrus' explanation of Nabonidus' failure was his neglect of Marduk. Politically motivated as that acknowledgment may have been, would Darius the Mede, who must have been closely connected to Cyrus, decree the virtual neglect of all gods? On the contrary, the policy of Cyrus and his immediate successors was one of tolerance to all religions. It was typical in the polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East to be largely tolerant, for any deity was acknowledged to have some degree of power. To be intolerant of a deity was to risk his wrath. To attempt to deprive all other gods of the prayer of their followers was to risk the wrath of all deities, again making it unlikely that that was the intention.

In summary, then, the first problem with the idea that Darius was prohibiting prayer to any deity is that prayer was an important aspect of all of the religious practices of the time. It would risk the wrath of the neglected gods to make such a decree, it would be unenforceable, and it was contrary to Persian policies.

A second difficulty attaches to the notion that Darius was making himself a god. Again we are somewhat hindered by our ignorance of the religious beliefs of Darius the Mede. Zoroastrianism in its purest form was supposed to be monotheistic in its worship of Ahura Mazda. While this would preclude deification of the king, it is disputed whether there is solid evidence that pure Zoroastrianism was practiced in the Achaemenid period. Nevertheless there is no indication that Achaemenid kings had even the slightest tendency toward self-deification.¹⁴

¹²M. Boyce, *Zoroastrians* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) 33.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁴Cf. R. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (Cleveland: World, 1963) 92. In an article by G. Widengren ("The Sacral Kingship of Iran," *Numen* Sup 4 [1959] 242-257) a case is made for the divine nature of the king

These difficulties fade somewhat when we consider the more tenable view of the king as sole representative of the gods (Montgomery, Keil, Young). This squares with the role of the king as delineated in the third-century-A.D. Persian theology. "God is absolute lord of both worlds; the king is his representative on earth and, as such, may himself take the title of *bagh*, 'god.'"¹⁵ His role was seen as that of a mediator.¹⁶ But these statements still do not go as far as Keil takes them, for a mediator is serving a priestly function and is not required to be the actual "manifestation" of deity. (It is likewise unclear why the decree as Keil perceives it should have the thirty-day limitation.) In the remainder of this paper I would like to examine some possible solutions to understanding the intent of the decree. These can only be presented tentatively because of uncertainties concerning the identity, and therefore the religious practice and policies, of Darius the Mede.

III. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The control element in this endeavor is the wording of the text, so we should look for a moment at the language that is used in the decree. The Aramaic text of 6:8b uses the root *bʿy* both in verbal and nominal forms. It refers to a request or the making of a request. I have demonstrated above that it is unreasonable to think that Darius has prohibited petitionary prayer of all sorts to anyone but himself. This leaves us two possible directions to go. Either (1) the king is setting himself up as the mediator for prayers going to any deity (in which case Darius is prohibiting the role of other priests), or (2) it must be assumed that *bʿy* here has some sort of idiomatic or technical meaning.

If a technical sense of *bʿy* exists, it is not evident in the extant texts. Neither the Aramaic term nor its Akkadian cognate (*bu-ū*) has any attested technical meaning (e.g. oracular) in the religious sphere. In the absence of such evidence the mediatorial role of the king is the better choice. Here we must ask why it was desirable for the king to set himself up as the sole mediator of prayers for the term of thirty days. How was it to be enforced, and what purpose could it have? Several possibilities suggest themselves, but they all eventually get back to the tendency toward syncretism that was growing within the practice of the teachings of Zarathuštra.

in Iranian thinking. Widengren points out that the king is considered to be descended from the gods and that his divine nature is supported by birth legends surrounding the kings and by various court ceremonies. However, the examples that Widengren has of these all date from the Sassanian or, at the earliest, the Parthian periods. The correlations or support to be found in the Achaemenid period provide no basis on which to posit sacral kingship. Of great significance is the letter sent by the Sassanian ruler Shahpuhr II. In claiming divine titles ("Brother of the Sun and Moon") he reports that the first to be honored with these titles was Arshak, the founder of the Parthian dynasty. It is also unfortunate that a primary source that gives support to sacral kingship is Xenophon (in his *Cyropaidea*), who is considered to have little of historical value to offer (cf. *CHI*, 2. 417-418).

¹⁵Zaehner, *Dawn* 297.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 301.

The acceptance of Zoroastrianism in the western half of the Persian empire, its propagation, and its transformation into something quite unlike the prophet's original message, seems to have been the work of the Magi who enjoyed a monopoly of religious affairs not only in their native Media but also in Persia and the whole western half of the Achaemenian Empire.¹⁷

This syncretism is reflected in the Younger Avesta, which was composed in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C.

In the Younger Avestan texts the monotheism of the Gathas [the actual teachings of Zarathuštra] is strangely contaminated with what has been called a "pagan" polytheism. Beside Ahura Mazda numerous other gods are worshiped, Mithra, Anahita, Verethraghna, Tištrya, Vayu, etc. There are passages in the hymns to these gods in which Ahura Mazda himself is represented as worshipping them. This polytheistic attitude is of course a travesty of Zarathuštra's intentions, even though the pious authors expressly ascribe it to him.¹⁸

During the time of Xerxes I (486-465) the worship of the *daivas* (deities unacceptable to Zarathuštra) was prohibited and certain temples of the *daivas* were destroyed in Xerxes' attempt to suppress syncretism. A decree forbidding the worship of the *daivas* could well have taken the same kind of form as the decree of Darius in Daniel 6, but such injunctions are unknown earlier than the time of Xerxes.

A reversal took place in the reign of Xerxes' successor, Artaxerxes I (465-425), when a reformed calendar apparently devised by the syncretistic Magi replaced the civil and religious calendars that had been in use up to that time.¹⁹ Of particular interest is the fact that this reformed calendar identified each of the thirty days of the month by the names of particular deities (*yazatas*). "At every Zoroastrian act of worship, the *yazatas* of both day and month are invoked."²⁰ If a king had wanted to prevent this sort of syncretism he likewise might have made a decree very similar to the one in Daniel 6 so that these deities could not be invoked. However, the calendar controversy is not known in the sixth century.

Artaxerxes II (405-359) promoted the image cult, unacceptable in the monotheistic teachings of Zarathuštra. Image shrines had existed throughout the Achaemenid period but here received royal endorsement. In each of these three cases in the later Achaemenid period it is the Magi who are seen as instrumental in moving toward syncretism.

The Magi would be, not the representatives of one particular religion, but technical experts of worship, professional priests who, equipped with barsman twigs and all the paraphernalia of a meticulous ritual, would conduct the service of any Iranian god to whom an employer willing to pay them should wish to render homage.²¹

¹⁷Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁸I. Gershevitch, "Zoroaster's Own Contribution," *JNES* 23 (1964) 14.

¹⁹For discussion of the calendar see *ibid.*, pp. 20-22; Boyce, *Zoroastrians* 70-72; *CHI*, 2. 774 ff.

²⁰Boyce, *Zoroastrians* 73.

²¹Gershevitch, "Contribution" 25.

It is this syncretizing tendency of the Magi, and eventually of the Achaemenid kings, that gives us what seems to me the most plausible possibility for explaining the decree issued by Darius the Mede. Darius would have been approached by the schemers with the suggestion that by setting himself up as the only legitimate mediator for prayers for a period of thirty days a stand could be made for the worship of Ahura Mazda according to the pure teachings of Zarathuštra. While it would certainly not eliminate syncretism nor depose the Magi from their powerful position, it would make a statement concerning the stand of the king, throwing his support to orthodox Zoroastrianism. Mary Boyce has already discussed the difficulties that would have been encountered in the attempt to make a transition to a purer form of Zoroastrianism.

What is impossible to gauge is the reaction to Zoroaster's teachings of those who were already devoted to the *ahuras*, and who, without any great awe of the *daevas* or eagerness to worship them, may yet have been reluctant to accept a doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of Ahura Mazda. The Vedic evidence suggests that from Indo-Iranian times the Lord Wisdom had been venerated as the greatest of the *ahuras*, solitary and very powerful, exalted over the mighty Mithra and Varuna. Nevertheless it may even so have been a difficult step to take, to acknowledge him as the one uncreated Being, Creator of all *yazatas*, the ultimate source of all good; and some who turned to the other *ahuras* for special favor and protection may perhaps have resented this vast claim, and have made common cause with the *daeva*-worshippers and the generality in seeking to suppress the new religion. It is small wonder, then, that its early progress seems to have been difficult and slow.²²

This would not have been viewed as a decree that would be actively enforced, except perhaps against selected rebellious Magi to make examples of them. While observance of the five daily times of prayer was obligatory for each individual as part of his service to God, the priests were responsible for a more public carrying out of the ritual.²³ The king was also involved in the public performance of prayers each day.²⁴ One of the innovations of Cyrus was the establishment of an elevated stand for fire (the most sacred element in Zoroastrianism) for the performance of the king's daily ritual.²⁵ This innovation is thought to have been intended to combat the syncretistic use of images in public worship. This would be the opportunity used to showcase his public stand against syncretism. It would be an action against the Magi only insofar as it provided a royal example of orthodoxy for public consumption and emulation. As each individual directed his daily prayers to the king as mediator, the king in his public ritual would direct those prayers to Ahura Mazda. The decree would not be intolerant toward the various subject peoples and would not be intended to address the various foreign religious groups that

²²Boyce, *History*, 1. 257.

²³Ibid., p. 259.

²⁴Concerning the role of king as priest see Widengren, "Sacral" 251.

²⁵Boyce, *Zoroastrians* 51.

comprised the empire. This is, after all, the time of Cyrus. It is well known that

he made no attempt . . . to impose the Iranian religion on his alien subjects—indeed it would have been wholly impractical to attempt it, in view of their numbers, and the antiquity of their own faiths—but rather encouraged them to live orderly and devout lives according to their own tenets.²⁶

Rather, it would have been intended to send a strong message to the Iranian population and particularly to the Magi. The decree would certainly have called for some alterations in their daily rituals, and may even have been viewed as oppressive.

While this is certainly speculative, it does address each of the problems inherent in the Biblical context and does so by using data well documented from the historical context. Darius could easily have been persuaded of the benefits of himself acting as mediator in order to urge by example that all Iranians give honor to Ahura Mazda. Of course we cannot prove that Darius the Mede was an orthodox Zoroastrian, since we do not know who he was. But there is evidence that Cyrus was a loyal worshiper of Ahura Mazda.²⁷ On the other hand, there are statements in Cyrus' inscriptions that would seem to separate him from the doctrines of Zarathuštra.

May all the gods, whom I have brought into their cities, pray daily before Bel and Nabu for long life for me, and may they speak a gracious word for me and say to Marduk my lord, "May Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses, his son, be blessed."²⁸

We can also see how the personal practice of Daniel would hardly occur to the king as a violation of the decree. Daniel, after all, was a foreigner. His practice had nothing whatever to do with orthodox or syncretized Zoroastrianism, nor did it involve the Magi. Nevertheless the enemies of Daniel could likewise easily make their case that here was a high Persian official who explicitly and knowingly did not carry out the letter of the decree.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷See Boyce, *Zoroastrians* 50–53, and esp. *History*, 2. 41–43; *CHI*, 2. 416. The evidence for Zoroastrian beliefs is found in the proper names in Cyrus' family. It is supported by Boyce based on other elements such as the fact that the Median nobility supported Cyrus' overthrow of Astyages. She accounts for this by her belief that he was a Zoroastrian while Astyages was a sponsor of the ancient Iranian beliefs. Boyce is further convinced that Cyrus was identified by the later Magi as Kavi Vishtaspa, the first royal patron of Zoroastrianism. Though this was a case of mistaken identity she feels that it confirms that Cyrus was a loyal Zoroastrian (pp. 68–69).

²⁸Cyrus Cylinder 34–35.