

AGAINST THE FLOW

The Author

John C. Lennox is Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford and Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science at Green Templeton College. He lectures on faith and science for the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics, and is author of a number of books on the relations of science, religion and ethics. He and his wife Sally live near Oxford.

johnlennox.org

By the same author

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Gunning for God

God and Stephen Hawking

Seven Days that Divide the World

AGAINST THE FLOW

The Inspiration of Daniel
in an Age of Relativism

JOHN C. LENNOX

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Foreword

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Why We Should Read Daniel

Daniel's story is one of extraordinary faith in God lived out at the pinnacle of executive power in the full glare of public life. It relates pivotal events in the lives of four friends – Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – who were born in the tiny state of Judah in the Middle East around two-and-a-half thousand years ago. As young members of the nobility, probably still teenagers, they were taken captive by the emperor Nebuchadnezzar and transported to his capital city Babylon in order to be trained in Babylonian administration. Daniel tells us how they eventually rose to the top echelons of power not only in the world empire of Babylon but also in the Medo-Persian empire that succeeded it. (I am well aware that this traditional dating of the book of Daniel has been challenged, and that many believe it is a work of the second and not the sixth century BC. This issue will be addressed at several points throughout the book, and a summary of the arguments can be found in Appendix E.)

What makes the story of their faith remarkable is that they did not simply continue the private devotion to God that they had developed in their homeland; they maintained a high-profile public witness in a pluralistic society that became increasingly antagonistic to their faith. That is why their story has such a powerful message for us today. Strong currents of pluralism and secularism in contemporary Western society, reinforced by a paralysing political correctness, increasingly push expression of faith in God to the margins, confining it if possible to the private sphere. It is becoming less and less the done thing to mention God in public, let alone to confess to believing in anything exclusive and absolute, such as the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Saviour. Society

tolerates the practice of the Christian faith in private devotions and in church services, but it increasingly deprecates public witness. To the relativist and secularist, public witness to faith in God smacks too much of proselytizing and fundamentalist extremism. They therefore regard it more and more as a threat to social stability and human freedom.

The story of Daniel and his friends is a clarion call to our generation to be courageous; not to lose our nerve and allow the expression of our faith to be diluted and squeezed out of the public space and thus rendered spineless and ineffective. Their story will also tell us that this objective is not likely to be achieved without cost.

As political correctness stifles Christian witness, atheism seems to become more and more vocal in the public arena. Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Christopher Hitchens in *God is Not Great*, and Michel Onfray in *Atheist Manifesto* have been rallying the troops behind them by heralding the dangers of religion and the desirability of eliminating it. In order to do this, these so-called New Atheists harness the immense cultural power of science. At a conference at the Salk Institute of Biological Sciences in La Jolla, California, in November 1994, Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg suggested ominously that the best contribution that scientists could make in this generation was the complete elimination of religion.

Weinberg and others portray atheism as the only intellectually respectable worldview. Intolerance of religion and growing disrespect of those with religious convictions are central features of their increasingly shrill onslaught. Indeed, their constant repetition of ragged and philosophically superficial arguments leads one to suspect that their great emperor of atheism is beginning to shiver through lack of clothes.

If Daniel and his three friends were with us today I have no doubt that they would be in the vanguard of the public debate, leading the counter-charge against the self-styled “four horsemen of the New Atheism”, as Dawkins and his allies Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens call themselves. In this book we shall try to learn something about what it was that gave that ancient foursome the strength and conviction

to be prepared, often at great risk, to swim against the flow in their society and give unequivocal, courageous public expression to what they believed. This will surely strengthen our resolve, not only to put our heads above the parapet, but also to make sure in advance that our minds and hearts are prepared – that our helmets are securely on – so that we do not get blown away in the first salvo.

CHAPTER 1

A MATTER OF HISTORY

Daniel 1

We need some background that will help us to get into the atmosphere of Daniel's story.¹ (For additional background, I recommend relevant articles in *The New Bible Dictionary* published by IVP.) The diminutive state of Judah was located at a geographical nexus in the ancient Middle East, where the interests of the great powers frequently clashed, and so it lived under constant threat of invasion by the neighbouring superpowers of that age. About half a century before Daniel was born, the world (at least, the relevant part of it for us) was dominated by the superpower Assyria. In the days of Hezekiah, one of the better kings of Judah, the Assyrian emperor Sennacherib marched on Judah in 701 BC. As Byron put it (in "The Destruction of Sennacherib"): "The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold." The sheep prepared themselves for a holocaust. Suddenly and unexpectedly Sennacherib withdrew (but that is another story), and Jerusalem was temporarily spared.

Eventually the great Assyrian capital city of Nineveh fell in 612 BC to the Babylonian and Mede armies, who subsequently continued the tradition of threatening to snuff Judah out completely. As if that were not enough, there was always Egypt in the south – no longer a superpower, its ancient glory already fading, but nevertheless a constant irritant. Earlier one of the reformist kings of Judah, Josiah, had lost his sense of perspective and embarked on a foolhardy

mission to assist the Babylonians in their attempt to take on the might of the Egyptian army. His attempt backfired and he was killed. Pharaoh quickly deposed Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, and deported him to Egypt, installing as a puppet ruler Jehoahaz's brother Eliakim, now called Jehoiakim. Adding insult to injury, Pharaoh imposed a swingeing fine on Judah of a hundred talents of silver and one of gold – a princely sum in those impoverished times.

Jehoiakim proved ineffective, and it was not long before he too was removed: not by the Egyptians but by the emperor of Babylon, Nabu-kudurri-usur II (Nebuchadnezzar II as he is more commonly known, or Nebuchadrezzar – there is evidence of shifting from *r* to *n* in transcriptions of Babylonian names). Earlier, in the summer of 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had defeated the Egyptians at the decisive battle at Carchemish on the Euphrates far to the north-east of Jerusalem. Not long after that signal military triumph, Nebuchadnezzar's father Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon as king. Thereafter he made regular visits to his conquered territories in the west, in order to take tribute and personnel from them and to dispense justice (see Wiseman 1991, page 22). It was one of those visits that permanently changed the trajectory of the lives of Daniel and his friends.²

It happened like this. As part of his policy for dealing with conquered nations, Nebuchadnezzar took the best of their young men to Babylon in order to have them trained to serve in his administration. Daniel and his friends were judged to be suitable material for that training, and so they were taken from their families, society, and culture, and transported to a strange and unfamiliar land many miles away. They had to cope not only with the emotional trauma of forcible removal from their parents, but also with the sheer strangeness of their new surroundings – new language, new customs, new political system, new laws, new education system, new beliefs. It must have been overwhelming. How did they come to terms with it?

God and history

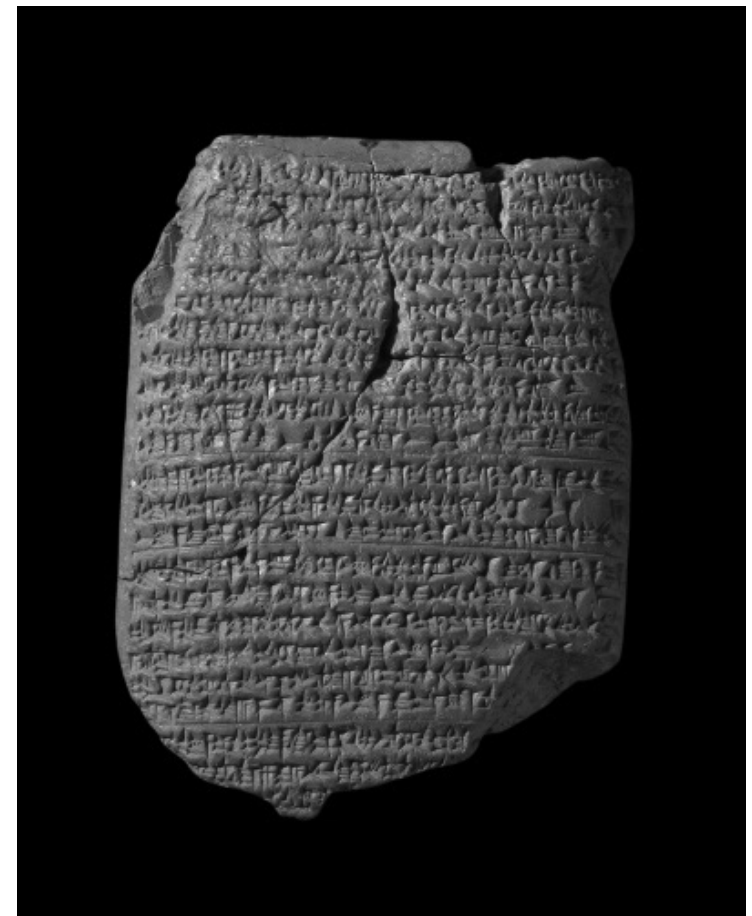
Daniel's explanation of how they did finally adjust is the fruit of a lifetime's reflection on the key events that shaped his life and made him what he was. He starts his book with a terse description of what was for him the momentous siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and his subsequent deportation to that most illustrious of ancient capital cities, Babylon on the Euphrates.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. (Daniel 1:1–6.)

Many things that Daniel could have mentioned, which we would have liked to read about, are tantalizingly omitted. For instance, there is nothing at all about his childhood in Judah, and nothing of the sorry political intrigue and turmoil in the years leading up to his deportation. Daniel chooses to start with the events of the year 605 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar turned his military attention to Jerusalem at the edge of his empire. Its rebelliousness chafed the emperor and so he set siege to it. Given the sheer military power

involved, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The city was taken, the king of Judah became a vassal, and the first wave of deportations to Babylon began. Jerusalem city itself survived at that time, until Nebuchadnezzar eventually destroyed it in 586 BC.

These events are documented in more detail in the ancient Babylonian chronicles, like the one below. Such stone cuneiform tablets confirm that Daniel is telling us actual history and not figments of his own imagination. We shall have to say more about the historicity of his account later, since it has often been called into question.



Babylonian Chronicle mentioning the capture of Jerusalem in 597 BC

The big question for someone with Daniel's background was: why had God allowed such a thing to happen? After all, was not his nation a special nation? Was it not the nation of Moses, who had been given the law directly by God? Was it not the nation that that same Moses had led out of the slave labour camps of Egypt and brought to the land that God had promised them as an inheritance? Was it not also the nation of David, the great consolidating king, who had made Jerusalem his capital, and whose son Solomon had built a unique temple to the living God? Had not God spoken to the patriarchs, priests, prophets, and kings of that nation, with ever increasing clarity, of a coming King, the Messiah (Anointed One), who would be a descendant of King David and preside in the future over an unparalleled period of peace and prosperity on earth? Indeed, this messianic vision finds an echo in the hearts of human beings from every culture, and it has captured the minds of contemporary nations to such an extent that it is recorded on the wall of the United Nations building in New York for the whole world to read:

and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.
(Isaiah 2:4.)

What would become of that vision if Jerusalem were to be sacked and the lineage of David eliminated? Would the promise of Messiah have to be relegated to the bulging dustbin of failed utopian ideas? What about God himself? Could he, so to speak, survive such a failure? How could Daniel and his friends any longer believe that there was a God who had revealed himself to their nation in a special way? If God is real, how could a pagan emperor like Nebuchadnezzar violate the sanctity of God's unique temple and get away with it? *Why did God do nothing?* This is in essence the hard question that is still very much with us today in a thousand different specific forms. Why does history so often take a turn that shakes confidence in the existence of a God who cares?

For the secular historian, of course, there is nothing strange about what happened in far-off 605 BC. The conquest of Judah was simply one more instance of the power law of the jungle – a huge heavily militarized nation smashes a tiny state. Judah just did not have the firepower to make any real impression on the highly trained and heavily armed troops of Nebuchadnezzar's forces. There is no contest between peashooters and tanks. Surely there was nothing more to it than that....

Indeed the secularist might well add that, if the victory had gone the other way and Judah had put Babylon to flight, one could perhaps begin to talk about God being involved. But it did not go that way; it went the way anyone would have predicted. So they say that we must simply face the fact that the idea of the descendants of David being special is no more than a tribal myth, invented to support a rather unstable royal house in a tiny middle-eastern state. The temple in Jerusalem was nothing but a building, its vessels nothing but human artefacts, however beautiful and valuable. The idea that God, if there were a God, would be interested in such an insignificant matter is patently absurd. Is not the easiest explanation, and by far the most likely one, that there is no God for the temple in any sense to be his? Why would you expect anything to happen? Don't people steal valuable items from churches these days? Does God stop them with a bolt of lightning from the sky?

This view seems very plausible to many people, if for no other reason than it is the only logical view open to the secularist. However, it was certainly not the view held by Daniel – and at least we can say that he was personally caught up with the events in question. He also knew what was at stake in terms of his credibility when he boldly stated that God was behind Nebuchadnezzar's victory: And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand... (Daniel 1:2).

Thus, the first thing that Daniel says about God in his book is that he is involved in human history: a statement of immense import, if it is true. Daniel is not content to inform us of what happened, he is much more interested in why it happened. He is interpreting history, and interpreting it in a way that is very provocative for the contemporary mind, to say the least. To assert that there is a God

behind history is to fly in the face of the prevailing wind of secularism, and therefore to invite pity, if not ridicule – certainly in a university history department. Yet, as Lesslie Newbigin says: “From Augustine till the eighteenth century, history in Europe was written in the belief that divine providence was the key to understanding events” (1989, page 71). However, the days are long gone when a leading historian, such as Herbert Butterfield, could readily write of God’s providence as “a living and active agency both in ourselves and in its movement over the length and breadth of history” (1957, page 147).

It is an illusion to think that the interpretation of history that rejects any possibility of divine action is the objective way, while Daniel’s way is subjective. All history is interpreted history. The real question is: is there evidence that Daniel’s interpretation is true?

Belief and evidence

Next time that somebody tells you that something is true, why not say to them: “What kind of evidence is there for that?” And if they can’t give you a good answer, I hope you’ll think very carefully before you believe a word they say. (Dawkins, 2003, page 248.)

I agree wholeheartedly with Richard Dawkins on this point. Indeed, as David Hume pointed out long ago, it is of the very essence of science to proportion belief to evidence. So far so good. But then Dawkins makes a distinction between the legitimate evidence-based thinking that is the stock-in-trade of the scientist and what he calls religious faith, which belongs to a very different category.

I think that a case can be made that faith is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate. Faith, being belief that isn’t based on evidence, is the principal vice of any religion.³

It would be a mistake to think that this extreme view is typical. Many atheists are far from happy with its militancy, not to mention its repressive, even totalitarian overtones. However, it is these excessive statements that receive media exposure, with the result that many people are aware of those views and have been affected by them. It would, therefore, be folly to ignore them. We must take them seriously.

From what he says, it is clear that one of the things that (sadly) has generated Dawkins’ hostility to faith in God is his impression that, whereas “scientific belief is based upon publicly checkable evidence, religious faith not only lacks evidence; its independence from evidence is its joy, shouted from the rooftops”.⁴ In other words, he takes all religious faith to be blind faith. However, taking Dawkins’ own advice, headlined above, we must ask: what is the evidence that religious faith is not based on evidence? Unfortunately there are people, while professing faith in God, who take an overtly anti-scientific and obscurantist viewpoint. Their attitude brings faith in God into disrepute and is to be deplored. Perhaps Richard Dawkins has had the misfortune to meet disproportionately many of them.

But that does not alter the fact that mainstream Christianity will insist that faith and evidence are inseparable. Indeed, faith is a response to evidence, not a rejoicing in the absence of evidence. The Christian apostle John gives the following explanation for his account of Jesus: “these are written so that you may believe...” (John 20:31). That is, he understands that what he is writing is to be regarded as part of the evidence on which faith is based. The Apostle Paul says what many pioneers of modern science believed, that nature itself is part of the evidence for the existence of God:

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20.)

It is no part of the biblical view that things should be believed where there is no evidence. Just as in science faith, reason, and evidence

belong together. Dawkins' definition of faith as "blind faith" turns out, therefore, to be the exact opposite of the biblical one. It is curious that he does not seem to be aware of the discrepancy.

Dawkins' idiosyncratic definition of faith provides a striking example of the very kind of thinking he claims to abhor – thinking that is not based on evidence. In an exhibition of breath-taking inconsistency, evidence is the very thing he fails to supply for his claim that faith rejoices in the independence of evidence. And the reason he fails to supply such evidence is not hard to find, for there is none. It does not take any great research effort to ascertain that no serious biblical scholar or thinker would support Dawkins' definition of faith. One might well be forgiven for yielding to the temptation to apply Dawkins' maxim to himself – and not believe a word he says about the Christian faith.

History and morality

So, what evidence did Daniel possess as the basis for his interpretation of history? The evidence is cumulative, and there is a sense in which it consists of his whole book. For instance, he later informs us (Daniel 9) that it was his belief in God that led him to expect a Babylonian invasion and conquest. We might reasonably say that he was so convinced of this that if Nebuchadnezzar had been stopped by an unexpectedly spirited defence by Judah, or even by some direct divine intervention, it would have created problems for his faith in God. We shall leave the details for their proper context, pausing only to focus on the central issue: the relation of history to morality.

From his parents and teachers in Jerusalem Daniel would have learned of the Genesis account that human beings are moral beings, made in the image of God. It formed the foundation of his understanding of the universe and life. The universe was a moral universe. The Creator was not some kind of cosmic magician, living in a box-like temple and performing magic to protect his possessions or his group of favourites. The moral character of God demanded that

he was not neutral towards human behaviour. This message formed a central part of the writings of the Hebrew prophets. In the years before Jerusalem was attacked Jeremiah had repeatedly warned the nation of the serious consequences of their increasing compromise with immoral pagan practices and the idolatry of the nations around them. They did not listen to Jeremiah, and it was not long before Babylon overran the nation and exiled most of the population, as he had explicitly predicted.

Judah had failed to grasp that God's loyalty to his own character, and therefore to his own creatures, has serious implications. Some of Judah's leaders had fallen into thinking that, because their nation had been chosen to play a special role for God in history, it did not really matter how the leaders or the nation behaved. This was dangerously irresponsible and undermined the moral fibre of the people, because it led to the rationalisation of corrupt and immoral behaviour that was incompatible with the law of God, albeit widely practised in the surrounding nations. Such behaviour had the knock-on effect of making the nation's claim to have a special role look absurd.

In our world today inconsistent moral behaviour on the part of those who claim to follow Christ devalues the Christian faith and causes people to mock it. What the leaders and many of the people in Judah had failed to see was that God does not have any favourites whose sins he simply disregards. God is no respecter of persons, no matter from which nation or level of society they come.

The point had been made many times before Daniel's day. The eminent Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield (1957, page 92) writes:

The ancient Hebrews are remarkable for the way in which they carried to its logical conclusion the belief that there is morality in the processes and the course of history. They recognised that if morality existed at all it was there all the time and was the most important element in human conduct; also that life, experience and history were to be interpreted in terms of it.

Moses and the Prophets had constantly stressed that God would discipline the people if they ignored the moral demands of the law. What is more, the nation of Judah ought to have known this best of all. About a century earlier it was exactly for this reason that the Assyrians had invaded Israel and deported most of them. God had warned them through Isaiah, and the nation had ignored it. History was now repeating itself. Judah, the only part still left, was driving at full speed past all the warning lights, and heading for the same disaster that had already befallen her sister, Israel.

Not long before Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, Jeremiah gave a direct warning of precisely what would happen, and why:

Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. For if you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their servants and their people. But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation. For thus says the Lord concerning the house of the king of Judah: “You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon, yet surely I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city. I will prepare destroyers against you, each with his weapons, and they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire. And many nations will pass by this city, and every man will say to his neighbour, “Why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city?” And they will answer, “Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God and worshipped other gods and served them.”” (Jeremiah 22:3–9.)

Judah did not listen, and the morally inevitable happened. Daniel draws attention to it in the opening statement of his book, where he records that Nebuchadnezzar besieged the city, and the Lord

gave Jehoiakim, King of Judah, into his hand. That bit of history made sense, when analysed from a moral perspective in the light of God’s warnings. The punishment fitted the crime. The nation had compromised with immorality, injustice and idolatry, and so it would be taken into captivity by the most idolatrous nation on earth.

Yes, the conquest of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar made moral sense in the divine scheme of things, but that does not mean that Daniel and his friends came to terms with it either immediately or easily. It is one thing to come to a sober estimate of turbulent and traumatic events after many years of reflection; it is quite another to have to live through them, which is what Daniel and the others had to do. At one level they could see the events as representing the judgment of God on the behaviour of the nation, and especially that of its leaders. But as thinking, feeling human beings, surely they would have had questions, just as we would.

Why, for example, should they (or we) have to suffer for other people’s actions? After all, they were normal young people, full of energy and ambition; yet already in their hearts they were determined to try to follow God. So why should they have to go through the pain of separation from their families? There were (and are) no immediate easy answers to these questions. Indeed, such answers as there were may well have taken a long time in coming. But in the end Daniel and his friends came to understand that God is interested not only in global history but also in the personal history of those who are often innocently caught up in its tragic aftermath.

I am aware, of course, that some will wish to question the fact that there is any overarching meaning in history. They regard the whole idea as an outmoded legacy of what they dub the “Judeo-Christian way of thinking”. John Gray, Professor of the History of European Thought at the London School of Economics, puts it this way (2002, page 48):

If you believe that humans are animals, there can be no such thing as the history of humanity, only the lives of particular humans. If we speak of the history of the species at all, it is only to signify the unknowable sum of these lives. As with

other animals, some lives are happy, some are wretched. None has a meaning that lies beyond itself. Looking for meaning in history is like looking for patterns in clouds. Nietzsche knew this, but he could not accept it. He was trapped in the chalk circle of Christian hopes.

I wonder how Gray knows this. I presume he would accept that his book, from which I have just quoted, is part of his life and history. If he is right in what he asserts, then his book can have no meaning beyond himself – and hence, surely, none for you or me. His theory of the meaninglessness of history fails to be valid for us, so he cannot know that your history or mine has no meaning. The circle in which he is trapped by his logical incoherence is made of sterner stuff than chalk. Like all who espouse such relativism, he falls into the error of making himself and his ideas an exception to the logical consequences of those ideas. His epistemology is incoherent.

Herbert Butterfield takes a very different view (1957, pages 10–11):

The significance of the connection between religion and history became momentous in the days when the ancient Hebrews, though so small a people, found themselves between the competing empires of Egypt, then Assyria or Babylon, so that they became actors, and in a particularly tragic sense proved to be victims in the kind of history making that involves colossal struggles for power... Altogether we have here the greatest and most deliberate attempts ever made to wrestle with destiny and interpret history and discover meaning in the human drama; above all to grapple with the moral difficulties that history presents to the religious mind.

What this amounts to is the importance of realizing that the meaning of history lies outside history. This is a particular instance of the principle that the meaning of a system is outside the system. Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed this well (1922, 6.41):

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value – and if there were it would be of no value. If there is a value, which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie in the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental. It must be outside the world.

The heart of monotheism is that God, who is outside history, is the guarantor of meaning. As One who stands outside of the unfolding cosmos he is uniquely qualified to give it meaning. Grappling with the moral difficulties that history presents is one of the main foci of Daniel's work. But Daniel, in common with the other biblical writers, does not mean thereby to imply a fatalism or determinism that reduces human beings to helpless pawns whose individual lives, with their loves and choices, their successes and failures, have no ultimate meaning whatsoever. It is surely self-evident that in an utterly deterministic universe love and genuine choice would be impossible.

When the Christian apostle Paul addressed the august Athenian philosophical court, the Areopagus, he pointed out that neither the Stoic explanation of the universe (featuring deterministic processes) nor the Epicurean explanation (featuring chance processes) was adequate to grasp the subtlety of things as they are.

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26–27.)

According to Paul, God is in ultimate control of history; but this does not eliminate, bypass, or otherwise invalidate human responsibility to seek and reach out for God.

This topic has been the food of philosophical debate for centuries. However, the Bible does not discuss the matter so much by giving us a philosophical treatise on it, as by focusing attention on the way it works out in down-to-earth history. This is a method of communicating ideas we encounter in the great literature of Russia. There is a real sense in which their philosophers are their novelists. If Russians wish to explore deep and complex ideas, like the problem of evil and suffering, they write novels about them, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* being cases in point.

So too in the Bible. The Apostle Paul indicates elsewhere (in Romans 9–11) that we can gain insight into the relationship between God's involvement in history and human responsibility by having a look at the (complex) story of Jacob, whose parents were told even before his birth that he would have a special role. As the Genesis account shows, this sovereign choice certainly did not imply a divine determinism that robbed Jacob of his freedom to choose. Indeed, the narrative shows in detail how God held Jacob both responsible and accountable for the methods he adopted in securing that role, and God disciplined him accordingly – particularly through his relationships with his own children. For instance Jacob deceived his own father Isaac, who was almost blind, by wearing the rough skin of a goat in order to pretend to be his older brother Esau. Many years later Jacob was himself deceived into thinking that his favourite son Joseph was dead, when his other sons brought Joseph's coat to him drenched in the blood of a goat. This story on its own is enough to show just how complex the outworking of God's overall control of history is, in making allowance for a degree of real human freedom and responsibility.

Such stories also show that we, with all the limitations of our humanity, can never have full understanding of the relationship between God's rule in history and human freedom and responsibility. That does not mean, however, that we should not believe in them. After all, most of us believe in energy, even though none of us knows what it is (see panel). The belief that both God's rule and human freedom are real is warranted primarily because this view

has considerable explanatory power. (In a similar way, the tension between seeing light simultaneously as particles and as a wave is tolerated in physical explanations of light.) The biblical narrative, and indeed history itself, makes more sense in light of this complex view, rather than if we deny either God's rule or a degree of human freedom. A great deal of humility is also called for, in view of what is ultimately (and probably necessarily) characterized by a certain degree of mystery.

Explanatory power

On one occasion, after giving a lecture on the relationship of science to theology in a major scientific institution in England, a physicist asked me how I could possibly be a mathematical scientist in the twenty-first century and hold the central belief of the Christian faith, that Jesus Christ was simultaneously human and God. I replied that I would be delighted to face his question if he could answer me a much easier scientific question first. He agreed.

"What is consciousness?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied, after a little hesitation.

"Never mind," I said, "let's think of something easier. What is energy?"

"Well," he said, "we can measure it and write down the equations governing its conservation."

"Yes, I know, but that was not my question. My question was: what is it?"

"We don't know," he said with a grin, "and I think you were aware of that."

"Yes, like you I have read Feynman and he says that no one knows what energy is. That brings me to my main point. Would I be right in thinking that you were about to dismiss me (and my belief in God) if I failed to explain the divine and human nature of Christ?"

He grinned again, and said nothing. I went on: "Well, by the same token, would you be happy if I now dismiss you and all your knowledge of physics because you cannot explain to me the nature

of energy? After all, energy is surely by definition much less complex than the God who created it?”

“Please don’t!” he said.

“No, I am not going to do that, but I am going to put another question to you: why do you believe in the concepts of consciousness and energy, even though you do not understand them fully? Is it not because of the explanatory power of those concepts?”

“I see what you are driving at,” he replied. “You believe that Jesus Christ is both God and man because that is the only explanation that has the power to make sense of what we know of him?”

“Exactly.”

If we are not to be unnecessarily cowed by this kind of argument, we need to grasp that it is not only believers in God who believe in concepts they do not fully understand. Scientists do as well. It would be just as foolish and arbitrary to dismiss believers in God as having nothing to say, because they cannot ultimately explain the nature of God, as it would be to dismiss physicists because they do not know what energy is. And yet that is exactly what often happens.

This argument, useful at the level of academic discussion, can also help calm the stormy waters of practical experience. Daniel does not give a detailed philosophical explanation, resolving the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility – although, with his knowledge of Scripture, I suspect he would have been well able to do so. Whatever the answer to that question is, it is not hard to imagine that Jeremiah’s predictions were an immense help in preparing him and his friends for the dark and turbulent days surrounding their deportation:

For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you.... (Jeremiah 29:10–14.)

It is clear from Daniel’s analysis of history that he took to heart what Jeremiah said – and so should we. In times of stress and upheaval it is profoundly reassuring to know that the God who is ultimately sovereign over global history is not aloof or remote from the ups and downs of our personal trajectory. God has plans, individual plans, for those who trust him. It certainly did not look like that as the four teenagers stumbled out of Jerusalem, watching (as we may imagine them) through tear-dimmed eyes as the anxious faces of their distraught parents receded into the distance. In those poignant moments they may not have felt that God was going to give them *a future and a hope*. But eventually he did.

That should encourage us when our faith in God is being put through severe testing, when our prayers seem to bounce off an apparently impenetrable heaven and doubts are mounting in the face of adverse circumstances and mounting public attack on the Christian faith. When Daniel and his friends’ emotions were torn they took real comfort from the knowledge that, although deeply traumatic, what was happening to them had been predicted by the prophets. And we can do the same. After all, the Lord Jesus himself made it plain that those who followed him would eventually be treated as he was:

I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. (John 16:1–2.)

Jesus said this to his disciples in advance so that, when they were eventually harassed and persecuted, they would know they had not fallen out of God’s hands. Perhaps an analogy can help us. Think of a road map. You scarcely ever need it when the road is broad and the signs are well illuminated. However, when the road gets narrow and rough and appears to be leading nowhere, it is very reassuring to have a map that shows you that this difficult terrain is precisely what you should expect at this stage in the journey, if you are on course. And it is that kind of “map” that can help us when the “road” of life

is rough. For Daniel it was very rough, but it was plainly marked on the map Jeremiah had provided.

Of course, realism tells us that there are many disturbing questions still to be faced. What does Jeremiah mean when he says that God has plans not to harm us? Were Daniel and his friends not harmed by being wrenched from the stability of their homes and taken to Babylon? Is a person not harmed by injury or disease, persecution or famine? Does a cancer that takes a wife from her husband, or a mother from her children, not harm that husband and family? What then can it mean, that God has plans not to harm us? The answer may be in considering what harm is from God's perspective. Jesus said:

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10:28–31.)

Jesus makes it clear that the kind of harm that kills the body is not harm as God counts harm. The apostle Peter said something similar, to buttress the faith of Christians who were about to go through a rough time of persecution:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.... (1 Peter 3:13–14.)

It is a sad fact that sometimes professing Christians bring trouble and suffering upon themselves because they have not been righteous. Peter is here writing to those who are suffering because they have been righteous, and he tells them not to be afraid.

What is it that makes the difference? Could it be that what we

think is harm looks different from God's eternal perspective? If physical death is the end of existence, as atheists assert, then Peter's words are utterly empty. Worse than that, they are positively deceitful. If death is not the end, but a doorway that marks a transition into something much bigger, everything looks different.

Daniel had that perspective. He ends his book by confidently asserting the hope of the resurrection. The very last words he records are those that were said to him by a messenger from another world:

But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days. (Daniel 12:13.)

To talk of another world beyond this one, and a resurrection in this world, is like waving red rags to the New Atheists. Well, perhaps not quite. They would be happy with other worlds on the basis of their conviction of a universal evolution that must have spawned life aplenty. But they are certainly not happy to envisage resurrection. By definition, a supernatural hole in history cannot be seen through the lens of a materialistic (or naturalistic) worldview. But that does not prove it isn't there. A physical apparatus that is designed only to detect light in the visible spectrum will never detect X-rays, but it doesn't prove that X-rays don't exist.

And there is such a well-attested hole in history, a singular point that does not fit into a reductionist theory of either history or science. As Cambridge theologian C. F. D. Moule has written (1967, pages 3, 13):

If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? ... The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church... remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself.

History already bears witness to the bodily resurrection of Jesus, around 600 years after Daniel's time. The resurrection constitutes powerful evidence establishing that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. It also shows, of course, that physical death is not the end.

But we are moving too rapidly. We must leave discussion of the end of Daniel's book to the appropriate place. I mention the resurrection here simply to point out that we shall never understand the stability and purposefulness of Daniel's life until we grasp the attitude of mind that characterized it. Although he lived *in* this world, he did not live *for* it. It was in another world that he invested his life, and it is there that he now enjoys his inheritance.

It goes without saying that one would be a fool to live for another world if that world did not exist. That really would be seriously delusional. On the other hand, if it does exist, not to invest one's life in it would be equally delusional, would it not?

CHAPTER 2

CITY OF IDOLS

Daniel 1

Even the trauma and pain of the preceding months were probably unable to prevent Daniel and his friends reacting with open-mouthed wonder at their first glimpse of Babylon. It will help us to understand him better, and the implications of his choices, if we pause here to take a look at it.

Near-Eastern expert Alan Millard writes (in Hoffmeier and Magary 2012, page 279):

The book of Daniel correctly reflects the building works of Nebuchadnezzar, in common with Herodotus and other Greek writers, and the use of Aramaic in the Babylonian court, also, no doubt, a widely known fact.

Babylon was a spectacular city, in a completely different category from anything a young man from Judah could ever have seen or even imagined. It was in fact the largest city in the world at the time, covering over 1,000 hectares (2,500 acres). Compared with this vast metropolis on the eastern bank of the great river Euphrates, Daniel's capital city Jerusalem must have seemed very small indeed.