

Whatever happened to Daniel 2:44?

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The title of this paper is a challenge that was put to me by a Hasidic friend, Eliyohu, ten years ago. Eliyohu and I had corresponded and met occasionally over a period of fifteen years during which time Eliyohu made a profession of faith in Yeshua and was even baptized in the River Jordan. However, due to the combined influences of traditional Judaism and some Jehovah's Witness friends, and in spite of acknowledging that the Tanakh and the Brit Hadashah taught the deity of the Messiah, Eliyohu refused to accept that Yeshua was God. He apostatized, converted to Hasidism, married a religious woman and moved to the Yonkers district of New York.

In the fall of 2003, Eliyohu was in the UK for a brief visit and as we walked among the herds of deer in the beautiful landscape of Knole Park in Sevenoaks, we argued (in the proper sense of the word) about a number of issues. Eliyohu was extolling the writings of Maimonides, and I expressed surprise that religious Jews revere him since the Rambam was a thorough-going rationalist. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, he put to me the question, "If Jesus is the Messiah, what happened to Daniel 2:44?"

The New JPS Translation* of the Tanakh translates the verse: "And in the time of those kings, the God of heaven will establish a Kingdom that shall never be destroyed, a kingdom that shall not be transferred to another people. It will crush and wipe out all those kingdoms, but shall itself last forever..."

The question relating to Dan. 2:44 is at least as old as Isaac Troki, who writes in *Hizuk Emunah*: "At the time of the king Messiah, there is to be only one kingdom and one king, namely, the true king Messiah. But the other empires and their rulers shall cease at that period, as we read in Daniel ii. 44... Whereas, we now actually see that many empires, different in their laws and habits, are still in existence; and that in each empire a different king is ruling; consequently the Messiah is not yet come." Troki expands the reference to "those kings" in Daniel 2:44 to include all empires and concludes that because there are many kingdoms still in existence, the kingdom of heaven has not yet been established."

As an Orthodox Jew, Eliyohu believes the indestructible kingdom of Dan. 2:44 will be established by the Messiah. Therefore, if Jesus is the Messiah, the kingdom of heaven should long since have been established. Since, according to Eliyohu, Jesus failed to fulfill that essential task, he could not be the Messiah. *End of argument!*

The question of Dan. 2:44 had never been put to me before and it is a verse I had never considered as a proof text for the Messiahship of Jesus. The verse does not appear to be dealt with in great detail Messianic apologists and few commentaries deal with. But since that discussion ten years ago, I have come to see that the verse forms a compelling argument for the Messiahship of Yeshua.

In *The Messianic Hope*, Michael Rydelnik warns of a trend among evangelicals towards playing down the issue of direct Messianic prophecy in the Tanakh and of thinking not in terms of prediction but of promises, principles and types. For Rydelnik, however, “The best way of understanding the Bible as a whole is to see the Old Testament as predicting the coming of the Messiah and the New Testament revealing him to be Jesus of Nazareth.”

Those of us engaged in witness to Jewish people know the value of Rydelnik’s traditional and time-honoured stance. To jettison the concept of Messianic prophecy in the Tanakh in favor of what might appear a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to biblical interpretation would be to abandon what has been one of the most powerful weapons in our spiritual arsenal for “the tearing down of strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4, King James Version). Religious Jews certainly see the Tanakh as a book about Messiah, as the Talmud testifies: “R. Hiyya b. Abba said in R. Johanan’s name: All the prophets prophesied [all the good things] only in respect of the Messianic era” (Sanhedrin 99a).

Traditional Judaism accepts the existence of Messianic prediction in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings and, on its own terms, the Tanakh is clearly a prophetic book. In Is. 41:21-23, God throws out a challenge to the idols of the nations:

Submit your case, says the LORD; Offer your pleas, says the King of Jacob. Let them approach and tell us what will happen. Tell us what has occurred, and we will take note of it; or announce to us what will occur, that we may know the outcome, Foretell what is yet to happen, that we may know that you are gods! Do anything, good or bad, that we may be awed and see.

If the gods of the nations have any reality, says the LORD through his prophet Isaiah, let them prove it by revealing the future. The challenge thrown down by Israel’s God to the gods of the nations was a challenge he himself could accept. Just as Elijah’s challenge to the prophets of Baal to call down fire from heaven was a test only an omnipotent deity could successfully pass, the ability to accurately foretell the future is the mark of the all-powerful, all-wise, all-knowing God. In Isaiah 46:9-10, Adonai declares:

Bear in mind what happened of old; for I am God, and there is none else, I am divine and there is none like Me. I foretell the end from the beginning, and from the start, things that had not occurred. I say: My plan shall be fulfilled; I will do all I have purposed. I summoned that swooping bird from the East, from a distant land, the man for My purpose. I have spoken, so I will bring it to pass; I have designed it, so I will complete it.

For the purpose of this paper, and to raise the issue from the realm of the purely theoretical, I propose dealing first with how I responded to Eliyohu’s challenge at the time and, secondly, the way my thinking on the verse has developed since.

My initial response to Eliyohu was that if Daniel's prophecy concerning the indestructible kingdom of heaven was not fulfilled at its pre-ordained time, Daniel was a false prophet because according to Dt. 18:22, "If the prophet speaks in the name of the LORD and the oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by the LORD; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously."

Eliyohu emphatically denied that Daniel was a false prophet even though, according to his understanding, the everlasting kingdom of 2:44 had failed to materialize. Seeing he was overlooking the implication of the words, "in the time of those kings," I asked who the four kings, in whose days the kingdom would be established, were. Eliyohu didn't know.

Daniel was written in the sixth century BC, at the time of the Babylonian captivity, and is a remarkable example of prophecy according to the parameters established in Dt. 18 and Is. 41 and 46. In chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had a dream, the meaning of which was revealed by God to Daniel. In the dream, the king had seen a colossal statue with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze and legs of iron. According to Daniel's interpretation of the king's dream, the various metals symbolized successive kingdoms that would rule over the Jewish people, beginning with Babylon the head. With few exceptions, biblical scholars agree that the following kingdoms were Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome.

The revelation of the establishment of the kingdom of heaven becomes the major motif throughout the rest of Daniel, particularly in the second half of the book. Following the fall of Babylon, the Jews came under the dominion of three further powers and the prophecy is clear: the kingdom of heaven was to be established within a divinely-ordained time period.

After his return to the States, Eliyohu emailed to say he had done some research into Daniel 2:44 and had been informed that Rashi, whom he considered to be "the best commentator around," said the kings of Dan. 2:44 were actually King Messiah!

What Rashi in fact said was quite the opposite of what Eliyohu claimed. In his Commentary, on 2:37 Rashi wrote, "Every mention of 'king' in Daniel refers to an earthly king, except this one [King of kings], which he said in reference to the Holy One, blessed be He, and this is what it means: The King of kings, Who is the God of heaven."

Leaving aside Rashi's assertion that the title "king of kings" is not a reference to Nebuchadnezzar, he and the "Sages of blessed memory" (see Shevu'oth 35b) were agreed that every other king in Daniel is an earthly king. Therefore, apart from the fact that the reference in 2:44 is to *four* kings, Rashi and the Sages agree that the kings are "earthly" kings, not the Messiah. On verse 44, Rashi comments that the phrase "in the days of these kings" is a reference to "*when the kingdom of Rome is still in existence*"! On the clause, "the God Of heaven will set up a kingdom," Rashi says this is "The kingdom of the Holy One, blessed be He, which will never be

destroyed, is the kingdom of the Messiah. it will crumble and destroy It will crumble and destroy all these kingdoms.”

Rashi, who according to Eliyohu is “the best commentator around,” states that the indestructible kingdom of Messiah had to be established in the days of the Roman Empire. Thus, Daniel 2 lays a foundation for understanding Daniel 9:

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed” (Dan 9:25f, English Standard Version).

In the second half of his book, Daniel experiences a vision in which he sees the four kingdoms of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream from a different perspective. In chapter 2, the Babylonian king sees his kingdom and the kingdoms that succeed Babylon in terms of declining magnificence and glory. In chapter 7 Daniel sees the same kingdoms as ravenous monsters preying on God’s people, and in the chapters that follow we have the equivalent of the director’s commentary on the vision: The world is in chaos; there are monsters on the loose; but the kingdom of God is coming and when it does God’s people will be delivered. The kingdom is not imminent but it will come: “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place” (Dan 9:24). The “seventy weeks” of Dan. 9:24 is a clarification of “in the days of those kings” in 2:44. The more precise “seventy weeks” sharpens up the more general “in the days of those kings”.

In the Tanakh, the nearest thing we have to a systematic revelation of the Messiah is the book of Daniel and yet when we open the pages of the New Testament, in the Gospels we are confronted with intense Messianic expectation: “The people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah” (Lk. 3:15).

Even among the Samaritans, who accepted only the authority of the five books of Moses, there was an expectation of the coming of Messiah: “The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things’” (Jn. 4:25).

It is also apparent from the four Gospels that first century Jews were anything but vague in their thinking about the coming Messiah. They believed, for example, that the Messiah would be a descendant of David (Mt. 22:42), that he would be born in David’s ancestral town of Bethlehem, (Mt. 2:4ff; Jn. 7:42), that he would be a

prophet (Jn. 1:25; 4:25, 29), that he would work miracles (Mt. 11:4; Mk. 15:32; Jn. 7:31) and that he would be the Son of God (Mt. 16:16; Mk. 14:61; Jn. 1:49).

What was the cause of the Messianic speculation in the period of the Second Temple? Although Daniel's prophecy of the kingdom of God must have stimulated the faith of many in Israel, in the period immediately following the prophecy and even after the return of the exiles there appears to have been no anticipation of the imminent appearance of the Messiah. The post-exilic prophets Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi lived under the rule of the Persians – the second of Daniel's four kingdoms – and were occupied primarily with spurring on the people to rebuild the temple. In the inter-Testamental period, after the Maccabees defeated the successor of Alexander the Greek, no one hailed Judah the Maccabee as the Messiah. A century after Judah, however, we know from the Gospels and Josephus that Messianic fervor was riding high.

In Acts 5:36f, the great Rabbi Gamliel reminded the Sanhedrin that two would-be Messiahs had already made their appearance: "Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered" (Acts 5:36f).

I once attended a lecture in London by the Jewish scholar Hyam Maccabee. Although Maccabee, rejects the New Testament he stated to his largely Jewish audience that Gamliel's address in Acts 5 is 'authentic' because in rabbinic tradition Gamliel is held in high esteem for his moderation: "Since Gamaliel the Elder died, reverence for the law has ceased and purity and moderation are vanished" (*Sotah* 49a).

Similarly, but in greater detail, Josephus records:

Now it came to pass, while Fadus was procurator of Judea, that a certain magician, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them, and follow him to the river Jordan; for he told them he was a prophet, and that he would, by his own command, divide the river, and afford them an easy passage over it; and many were deluded by his words. However, Fadus did not permit them to make any advantage of his wild attempt, but sent a troop of horsemen out against them; who, falling upon them unexpectedly, slew many of them and took many of them alive. They also took Theudas alive, and cut off his head, and carried it to Jerusalem... besides this, the sons of Judas of Galilee were now slain; I mean of that Judas who caused the people to revolt, when Cyrenius came to take an account of the estates of the Jews... (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XX, iv,1,2).

It is significant that in the Jewish division of the books of the Bible, Daniel is not included in the Prophets nor is the book included in the annual cycle of synagogue readings. Instead, Daniel is found in the third division of the Hebrew Bible known as the *Ketuvim*, the "Writings," which includes Psalms, Ecclesiastes and the two books

of Chronicles. Nevertheless, in spite of Daniel's exclusion from the prophetic section of the Jewish Bible and from the synagogue readings, a rabbinic ruling reveals that Daniel is indeed a prophetic book and that his book reveals the time of the coming of Messiah. The Talmudic tractate *Megillah* informs us that "the *Targum* of the Prophets was composed by Jonathan ben Uzziel under the guidance of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi and that ben Uzziel sought to reveal the inner meaning of the *Ketuvim*, the section of the Bible that includes the book of Daniel. However, says *Megillah* 3a, a Bath Kol forbade ben Uzziel to reveal the inner meaning of the *Ketuvim* because in it "the date of the Messiah is foretold"!

We possess a Targum on every book of the *Ketuvim* except the book of Daniel because, says the Talmud, in that book is contained the date of the Messiah. Josephus strengthens the theory that Daniel is the book in which the date of Messiah is contained when he says, "We believe that Daniel conversed with God; for he did not only prophesy of future events, as did the other prophets, but also determined *the time of their accomplishment*" (*Antiquities*, Book 10, ch 11, v7).

The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal that the Essene Community at Qumran understood Daniel 9 to contain a revelation of the time of the coming of Messiah. Scroll 11Q13, *The Coming of Melchizedek*, says:

This visitation is the Day of Salvation that He has decreed through Isaiah the prophet concerning all the captives, inasmuch as Scripture says, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion "Your [God] reigns"" (Isa. 52:7)... "The messenger" is the Anointed of the spirit, of whom Daniel spoke, "After the sixty-two weeks, an Anointed one shall be cut off" (Dan. 9:26). (*The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, Michael Wise, Martin Abegg Jr & Edward Cook, p 457)

Lawrence M Wills, in *The Jewish Study Bible*, observes that "Daniel was evidently considered a prophet at Qumran and elsewhere in early Judaism (Josephus, *Antiquities* 10:266-68), but because prefigurations of Christ and Christian resurrection were seen in Daniel by the early Church, the rabbinic tradition hesitated to embrace the visions of Daniel."

The heightened Messianic fervor among Second Temple Jews confirms that the Jews of that period understood they were living in the time of Daniels fourth kingdom and therefore were expecting the Messianic Kingdom to break into world history.

I want to suggest that this Messianic expectation may shed light on the origin of the mysterious ritual that takes place early in the Passover Seder, the breaking of the *afikomen*. In *A Popular Dictionary of Judaism*, Lydia and Dan Cohn-Sherbok define *afikomen* as a "Hebrew" word meaning "dessert"! In fact *afikomen* is Greek not Hebrew and some believe the term derives from the Greek word for "dessert," *epikomoi*. Others suggest it comes from *epi komon*, a call for after dinner entertainment, while others think it derives from *epikomion*, a "festival song".

All these theories, however, are almost certainly incorrect. In 1925, the German scholar Robert Eisler proposed that the *afikomen* was part of the Passover observed by Jews at the time of Jesus and that the broken matzah represented the Messiah. Confirmation for Eisler's theory came to light in the 1930s when a Greek copy of *Peri Pascha* ("On the Passover"), written by Melito, the second-century bishop of Sardis, was discovered. The biblical scholar Frank Moore Cross described *Peri Pascha* as "nothing less than a Christian Passover Haggadah" and in it Melito twice refers to Jesus as the "one who is coming (*afikomen*) out of heaven to the earth"!

Nevertheless, Eisler's thesis was opposed by both Jewish and Christian scholars and was largely forgotten until 1966 when David Daube, a Jewish scholar at Oxford University, revived it and produced further documentation to support Eisler's theory. Daube argued that the term *afikomen* was derived from the Greek verb *afikomenos* meaning "the Coming One" or "He who has come" and that the "Coming One" was none other than the Messiah.

In a lecture entitled "He that Cometh" given at St Paul's Cathedral under the auspices of the London Diocesan Council for Christian-Jewish Understanding, Daube set forth a case that the unleavened bread Jesus gave to his disciples at the Last Supper was the *afikomen*. When Jesus announced, "This is my body," said Daube, he was making use of an existing prophetic tradition to reveal himself as the Messiah. According to Daube, the messianic symbolism was eventually lost, deliberately distorted or possibly suppressed by rabbinic authorities, giving rise to the later interpretations of the word as a "dessert" or an "after-dinner entertainment". Perhaps official Judaism abandoned the existing customs surrounding the middle matzah precisely because the disciples of Yeshua adopted them. Also, as the Church became increasingly Gentile and lost sight of its Jewish roots, the Passover elements of the Lord's Supper probably became submerged beneath heated discussions about transubstantiation, the "Real Presence" and the efficacy of the sacrament.

To this day, Passover is linked in Jewish thinking to the coming of the Messiah, and at every Passover Seder a place is set at table for Elijah, the forerunner of Messiah. If Eisler and Daube were correct in believing that the *afikomen* ritual existed in some form at the time of Yeshua, it would make eminent sense to suppose that it was introduced to the Passover Seder by the rabbis after Rome, the fourth and final beast of Dan. 7, began to rule the land of Israel. Josephus records that at Passover in the first century, anti-Roman feeling ran higher than usual among the people of Jerusalem and the pilgrims who were there for the festival, therefore the Roman governor always had a full contingent of soldiers present to quell any riots. With the great groundswell of Messianic hope, this would surely be the time for the rabbis to introduce a further messianic element – the *afikomen* – into the Passover, thus reinforcing in the hearts of the people the conviction that the Messiah was "coming" (c.f. Lk. 2:25 and 24:21).

As I indicated at the beginning of this paper, Dan. 2:44 is a very powerful proof text for Jesus being the Messiah. When the implications of the verse are presented to a pious Jew who believes in the divine inspiration of the Tanakh, it leaves him with

little room for maneuver (although, as my colleague Richard Gibson was quick to point out, there is *always* room to maneuver if a person is fast enough!).

The verse clearly reveals that the Messianic Kingdom was to be established no later than the time of the Roman occupation of Israel, a view endorsed by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, no less. If Daniel was a true prophet according to the definition of Dt. 18:18ff, the eternal kingdom of heaven must be here now. The fact that the empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome no longer exist is further proof that the Messianic Kingdom has come. If it has not, Daniel was a false prophet and his book should be expunged from the Jewish canon of Scripture.

Anti-missionary Moshe Shulman attempts to avoid the point by interpreting the two legs of Nebuchadnezzar's as 'a clear reference to the Eastern and Western Empires,' of Rome. He then argues that it was 'during the time of these kings the kingdom would arise. So it clearly does not apply to Rome of the time of Jesus.'

Assuming for the sake of argument that the two legs of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream were indeed the eastern and western empires established by Diocletian in 285, the kingdom of heaven would have had to be established in that period and the Roman empire brought to an end. Shulman does not comment on the fact that less than thirty years after the empire was divided, in 313 the Edict of Milan would grant Christians freedom of worship and the Christian faith would become the official religion of the empire. If the kingdom of heaven was not established while the empire of Rome was still in existence, then according to Dt. 18, Daniel was a false prophet.

It should not be overlooked that according to Dan. 2:34-35, the stone "hewn without hands" that struck the statue "became a great mountain and filled the earth". No time scale is given for the transition from stone to mountain. This fits well with Isaiah's prophecy of the Prince of Peace whose government and peace increases without end (Is.9:6)

The question is then bound to arise: "If the kingdom is already here, where is it?" That question serves only to vindicate Yeshua's solemn statement to Nicodemus that to "see the kingdom of God," one "must be born again" (Jn. 3:3). Only those "born of water and the Spirit" can "enter" the Kingdom (Jn. 3:5 c.f. Ezek. 36:25ff) and only those in the Kingdom can "see" it (Jn. 3:3).

If Yeshua was not the Messiah, who established the kingdom of heaven in the time of the fourth kingdom? Someone must have established the kingdom in the time of the Roman empire. If it wasn't Yeshua, who was it?

Here, it seems to me, is a dilemma on a par with C. S. Lewis's famous "Liar, Lunatic or Lord?" argument. The verse Eliyohu considered to be a watertight case against the messiahship of Yeshua actually constitutes a very case for Paul's contention that evidence that "*when the fullness of time had come*, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 4:4,5).

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