**The Felled Tree – Metaphor and Theology**

**The Dream of the Tree (Dan 4) in light of the Shoot of Jesse Prophecy (Isa 10:33-11:9)**

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**Abstract**

This paper deals with the connection between the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah (10:33-11:9) and the dream of the tree in Daniel (3:31-4:34). Several scholars briefly noted this connection but did not analyze its meaning and purpose. This paper seeks to demonstrate how the perspective presented in Dan 4 serves as an “inner-biblical interpretation” for the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah, shedding light on theological perceptions as reflected in Isa 10:33-11:9 and Dan 4. Based on the metaphor of the felled tree in both sources, I point out three stages of the metaphor’s development and the theological messages that the various authors express through the use of this metaphor.

**Introduction: The king-tree metaphor**

Trees are metaphorically used to represent the king in both the Bible and in other ancient Near Eastern texts.[[1]](#footnote-1) Sometimes the tree and the king are linked in a parable.[[2]](#footnote-2) The tall tree often symbolizes the king’s hubris (Ezek 31:1-14; Isa 2:12-17) which is later felled or burned as retribution, portending the king’s upcoming fate (Isa 10:16-19; Isa 9:13-20). Occasionally, the king-tree metaphor focuses on the tree’s renewed growth instead (Job 14:7-9; Isa 6:11-13; Isa 27:2-6).

In this paper, I focus on metaphors of the latter type, those which describe the tree’s renewed growth following its destruction. These metaphors abound in the prophecies of Isaiah son of Amotz, and, as Nielson has correctly pointed out, they are specifically employed for transmitting theological messages.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I examine the two metaphors that describe the tree’s renewed growth following its destruction and show how the dream of the tree in Daniel (3:31-4:34) serves as an “inner-biblical interpretation” for the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah (10:33-11:9). The connections between the book of Isaiah and the book of Daniels, both its first, narrative part (1-6)[[4]](#footnote-4) and its second, apocalyptic part (7-12)[[5]](#footnote-5) have been addressed at length.[[6]](#footnote-6) Various scholars have also noted the connection between Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the tree and the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah but they did not discuss its theological significance.[[7]](#footnote-7) I examine the metaphor of the felled tree in these two sources and describe three stages of the metaphor’s development, as well as the theological messages that the authors propound through its use.

I begin my discussion with the dream of the tree in Daniel, focusing especially on the third part of the dream (4:12-14). I present various commentaries on these verses and point to two images that create a connection between this dream and the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah: the image of the shackled roots and the image of the roots’ regeneration.

In the second section of the paper, I focus on the theological meaning of the tree metaphor and present its three stages of development – two occurring within Isaiah and the third in the book of Daniel.

In the third and final section of this paper, I discuss the change in the metaphor of the dream of the tree: Why do the roots of the tree describe Nebuchadnezzar? What are the theological implications of this shift?

**1. The dream of the tree (Dan 4) and the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy**

The dream of the tree, as it appears in Dan 3:31-4:34, is Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream. In this dream he sees a tree that is visible to the ends of the earth, whose branches reach the sky. Birds perch in the tree, animals take shelter in its shade, and its fruit nourishes all living things. Then an angel descends from heaven and proclaims that it will be destroyed. The evil tidings are accompanied by a small consolation: The tree will not be completely destroyed; rather, its roots will remain underground, enabling future growth.

Like Nebuchadnezzar’s previous dream, the dream of the statue (Dan 2), I believe that the dream of the tree can also be divided into three sections:[[8]](#footnote-8) The first part of both dreams describe an enormous object – a tree or a statue (2:31-33; 9:7-9), the second part describes the felling of the tree or the smashing of the statue (2:34-35a; 4:10-11), and the third part describes its restoration (2:35b; 4:12-14), with the rock that smashed the statue becoming a mountain that filled the earth, and the tree roots symbolizing the hope for rehabilitation. Daniel interprets the two dreams for Nebuchadnezzar. The statue in the first dream symbolizes the four empires that will rise and fall one after the other, as opposed to the restoration of divine rule, which is likened to the mountain. By contrast, the dream of the tree is concerned exclusively with Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. The tree’s demise portends Nebuchadnezzar’s expulsion from human society to that of the animals, for seven eras, during which time his heart will transform from human to animal. The tree’s roots symbolize Nebuchadnezzar’s reinstitution as king after he praises God and acknowledges His supremacy.

The third part of the dream describes the rejuvenated roots: "בְּרַם עִקַּר שָׁרְשׁוֹהִי בְּאַרְעָא שְׁבֻקוּ וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" (‘Nevertheless, leave the stump and roots in the earth, [and a binding of] iron and bronze in the tender grass of the field,’ Dan 4:12). The words "וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" are difficult, as this sentence lacks a verb, making it unclear whether they are to be linked to ‘in the tender grass of the field’ that follows them, or not. In any case, there are clearly two images here: the roots that remain in the earth after the felling of the tree and the binding of iron and bronze. These two images form an inner-biblical explanation for the “Shoot from the stump of Jesse” prophecy in Isaiah, as I will now demonstrate.

"**וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ": Do the iron and bronze bonds refer to Nebuchadnezzar or to the tree?**

The words "וּבֶאֱסוּר דִּי פַרְזֶל וּנְחָשׁ" can be understood as part of the allegory (meaning, the tree) or as referring to that which it symbolizes (meaning Nebuchadnezzar, who turns into an animal). The words that precede them refer to the allegory (the roots of the tree), while the words that follow refer to Nebuchadnezzar, who will be drenched by the dew, will eat the grasses of the earth, and whose heart will transform from human to animal for the duration of seven eras.

Rashi understands these words as referring to Nebuchadnezzar. He likens the shackling of Nebuchadnezzar with iron and bronze chains to the harnessing of a horse: Nebuchadnezzar will not only be drenched by the dew and eat grasses like an animal, but he will also be chained to the tree as one chains an animal. Saadia Gaon also takes this approach,[[9]](#footnote-9) as do Charles,[[10]](#footnote-10) Hartman,[[11]](#footnote-11) Henze,[[12]](#footnote-12) and Collins.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The claim that the iron and bronze chains refer to Nebuchadnezzar, and not to the tree, is bolstered by a verse in Chronicles that describes shackling in bronze chains: ‘Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king… *Nebuchadnezzar* king of Babylon attacked him *and bound him with bronze shackles* to take him to Babylon’ (2Chr 36:5-6). Both verses mention both shackling in bronze chains and Nebuchadnezzar; however, while in Chronicles Nebuchadnezzar is the one who does the shackling, in Dan 4 it is he who is shackled. The connection between these verses demonstrates the element of *quid pro quo*: As punishment for shackling Joakim, the king of Judah, in bronze chains, and exiling him to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar himself was shackled in bronze chains and exiled from human society.

Other scholars proposed that these words refer to the tree instead.[[14]](#footnote-14) This claim may be backed by findings from the ancient Near East which feature trees encircled by iron rings: Archeologists found remnants of trees with bronze rings at the entrance to the Shemesh temple in Mesopotamia (from the time of Sargon II, 721-705 BC);[[15]](#footnote-15) and a cylindrical seal and tablets from the palace of Ashurbanipal II (885-856 BC) in Nimrod feature metal rings that encircle tree stumps.[[16]](#footnote-16) In addition, Nebuchadnezzar II’s throne room in Babylon had a picture of palm trees whose trunks were encircled by four yellow and green rings.[[17]](#footnote-17) In all these findings the rings encircled the tree trunks, not their roots; however, they may indicate a similar reality.[[18]](#footnote-18)

If we can accept the claim that these words refer to the tree, then we could claim that the author of Dan 4 drew his motif of shackling the roots of a tree from Isaiah’s prophecy: ‘He will cut down [נִקַּף] the thickets of the forest with iron, And Lebanon will fall by the Mighty One’ (Isa 10:34). The verb נק"פ in this verse means ‘to chop’ (the tree); however, as Michael Segal correctly pointed out, this may be an example of an erroneous inner-biblical interpretation,[[19]](#footnote-19) where the author of Dan 4 understood the verb נק"פ in the sense of ‘encircling,’ leading him to the idea of encircling the tree trunk with iron after it was felled.

**2. Use of the tree metaphor to cope with the theological quandary**

In addition to shackling tree roots in iron chains, the image of the roots’ renewed growth appears as well. This image expresses hope, as in Job 14 (vv. 7-9): ‘At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail.’ In both cases, the authors use the roots metaphor to present a theological framework for understanding the rise of the empires. Isaiah sees the great expansion and strength of the Assyrian empire toward the end of the eighth century BC, and the author of Dan 4 experiences the rise of the Hellenistic empire. The enormous power of the emperor may be viewed as a threat to God, and therefore requires a theological explanation.

Isaiah presents a revolutionary theology by use of the tree metaphor, as found throughout Isa 10 (vv. 5-6; 15; 16-19; 33-34). The prophecy opens with the words: ‘Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me…’ (10:5-6). It is God who sends Assyria against his people, decribing Assyria as a rod, a club, and further on as an ax. Assyrian propaganda inscriptions include the motif of felling trees, and several Assyrian rulers boast of cutting down forests during their conquests.[[20]](#footnote-20) The prophet uses the same motif of cutting down trees, turning it into a metaphor and adapting it to his own purposes through “rhetorical inversion.”[[21]](#footnote-21) While the Assyrians proudly describe themselves as those who fell trees, Isaiah mocks their hubris: ‘Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it, or the saw boast against the one who uses it?’ (v. 15) and asserts that it is God who chops down the trees. Assyria is but a tool in God’s hand. According to this metaphor, the felled tree symbolizes Judaea.

The metaphor develops further on. If Assyria insists on proudly ignoring its own true place and stature, it will be punished. Instead of the ax which fells the tree, it will turn into a tall tree itself, ‘the splendor of his forests and fertile fields’ (v. 18), which will be destroyed by ax or by fire. In vv. 16-19 the prophet describes the fire consuming the forest, consuming their thorns and briers in a single day. These verses open with the word ‘therefore,’ connecting to Assyria’s hubris as described above.[[22]](#footnote-22) While the prophecy opens with God sending (שלח)Assyria against his people, now God sends (משלח)the ax against them. Only a remnant will survive the flames, trees so few and far between that even a child could count them.

The context implies that the tall trees mentioned in vv. 16-19 describe Assyria. However, if we isolate these verses from their context, there could be other ways of understanding the metaphor. Various scholars noted that vv. 16-23 form a sub-unit that was added to ch. 10 at a later stage,[[23]](#footnote-23) where its first section, vv. 16-19, comprise an earlier prophecy that originally described the misfortunes of Judaea and not of their Assyrian enemies.[[24]](#footnote-24) This claim is based upon a comparison to other prophecies in Isaiah. These verses (16-19) combine the two metaphors, the burning forest and the emaciation.[[25]](#footnote-25) An examination of these two metaphors shows that both are taken from proximal prophecies in Isaiah that speak of Judaea’s fate.[[26]](#footnote-26) The emaciation metaphor, which describes damage to the flesh, is clearly related to the prophecy in Isa 17:4-6. The following table demonstrates the linguistic connections between the two:

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| --- | --- |
| Isa 17:4-6 | Isa 10:16-19 |
| [4] וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִדַּל **כְּבוֹד** יַעֲקֹב **וּמִשְׁמַן** בְּשָׂרוֹ **יֵרָזֶה:** [5] וְהָיָה כֶּאֱסֹף קָצִיר קָמָה וּזְרֹעוֹ שִׁבֳּלִים יִקְצוֹר וְהָיָה כִּמְלַקֵּט שִׁבֳּלִים בְּעֵמֶק רְפָאִים: [6]  ו**נִשְׁאַר בּוֹ** עוֹלֵלֹת כְּנֹקֶף זַיִת שְׁנַיִם שְׁלֹשָׁה גַּרְגְּרִים בְּרֹאשׁ אָמִיר אַרְבָּעָה חֲמִשָּׁה בִּסְעִפֶיהָ פֹּרִיָּה נְאֻם־ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:4 In that day the **glory** of Jacob will fade; the **fat** [**מִשְׁמַן**] of his body will **be emaciated**. 5 It will be as when reapers harvest the standing grain, gathering the grain in their arms— as when someone gleans heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim. 6 Yet some gleanings will **remain**, as when an olive tree is beaten, leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches, four or five on the fruitful boughs,” declares the Lord, the God of Israel. | [16] לָכֵן יְשַׁלַּח הָאָדוֹן ה' צְבָאוֹת **בְּמִשְׁמַנָּיו** **רָזוֹן** וְתַחַת **כְּבֹדוֹ** יֵקַד יְקֹד כִּיקוֹד אֵשׁ: [17] וְהָיָה אוֹר־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֵשׁ וּקְדוֹשׁוֹ לְלֶהָבָה וּבָעֲרָה וְאָכְלָה שִׁיתוֹ וּשְׁמִירוֹ בְּיוֹם אֶחָד: [18] וּכְבוֹד יַעְרוֹ וְכַרְמִלּוֹ מִנֶּפֶשׁ וְעַד־בָּשָׂר יְכַלֶּה וְהָיָה כִּמְסֹס נֹסֵס: [יט] **וּשְׁאָר** עֵץ יַעְרוֹ מִסְפָּר יִהְיוּ וְנַעַר יִכְתְּבֵם:16 Therefore, the Lord, the Lord of Hosts, will send **an emaciating disease** upon **מִשְׁמַנָּיו**; under his glory a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame. 17 The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers. 18 The splendor of his forests and fertile fields it will completely destroy, as when a sick person wastes away.19 And the **remaining** trees of his forests will be so few that a child could write them down. |

Both prophecies use the emaciating metaphor בְּמִשְׁמַנָּיו/ וּמִשְׁמַן בְּשָׂרוֹ; רָזוֹן/ יֵרָזֶה; כְּבֹדוֹ/ כְּבוֹד יַעֲקֹב and both mention the concept of remnant: ‘And the remaining trees of his forests’ (10:19); ‘Yet some gleanings will remain’ (17:6).

The conflagration metaphor mentioned in vv. 17-18 is also present in a previous prophecy where the prophet rebukes Ephraim. A clear linguistic connection can be found between the two:

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| --- | --- |
| Isa 10:17-18 | Isa 9:13-18 |
| [יז] וְהָיָה אוֹר־יִשְׂרָאֵל **לְאֵשׁ** וּקְדוֹשׁוֹ לְלֶהָבָה **וּבָעֲרָה** **וְאָכְלָה שִׁיתוֹ וּשְׁמִירוֹ** **בְּיוֹם אֶחָד:** [יח] וּכְבוֹד **יַעְרוֹ** וְכַרְמִלּוֹ **מִנֶּפֶשׁ וְעַד בָּשָׂר** יְכַלֶּה וְהָיָה כִּמְסֹס נֹסֵס:17 The Light of Israel will become a **fire**, their Holy One a flame; **in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers**. 18 The splendor of his **forests** and fertile fields it will completely destroy, both soul and flesh, as when a sick person wastes away. | [יג] וַיַּכְרֵת ה' מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל רֹאשׁ וְזָנָב כִּפָּה וְאַגְמוֹן **יוֹם אֶחָד:** [יד] זָקֵן וּנְשׂוּא־פָנִים הוּא הָרֹאשׁ וְנָבִיא מוֹרֶה שֶּׁקֶר הוּא הַזָּנָב... [יז] כִּי **בָעֲרָה כָאֵשׁ** רִשְׁעָה **שָׁמִיר וָשַׁיִת תֹּאכֵל** וַתִּצַּת בְּסִבְכֵי **הַיַּעַר** וַיִּתְאַבְּכוּ גֵּאוּת עָשָׁן:13 So the Lord will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm branch and reed **in a single day.** 14 the elders and dignitaries are the head, the prophets who teach lies are the tail… 17 Surely wickedness **burns like a fire**; **it consumes briers and thorns**, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke. |

Both prophecies mention the conflagration, the forest, and the fire. Both apply the verb *‘*אכ"ל to the object of fire, where the subject of consumption are the briars and thorns. In ch. 9 the order is ‘briers and thorns,’ as this word-pair usually appears in Isaiah (see, for example, 5:6; 7:23; 7:34; 7:25; 27:4) while in ch. 10 the order is reversed: ‘it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers’ (v. 17). The reversed order may show that chapter 10 is quoting the previous chapter, forming a chiasm by reversing the order of the familiar expression.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition, both prophecies use the metaphor of burning thistles to express swift destruction – ‘in a single day’ (9:13; 10:17), a fire which spreads widely, ‘both head and tail, both palm branch and reed’ (v. 13), and ‘both soul and flesh’ (10:18). The prophecy in ch. 9 is explicitly aimed at Israel: ‘The Lord will cut off from Israel’; perhaps this indicates that the adjacent prophecy in ch. 10 was also originally aimed at Israel or Judaea and not at Assyria.

In addition to these two analogies, the continuation of the prophecy may also point to an Israelite audience. Verse 19 describes the remnant who will survive the great catastrophe: ‘And the remaining trees of his forests will be so few that a child could write them down.’ So few trees will remain, that even a child could count them. The notion of ‘remnant’ as referring to Israel appears in many places throughout Isaiah, such as the adjacent verses (20-23), making it plausible that also v. 19 originally spoke of the remnant who will remain in Judaea.

Incorporating vv. 16-19 into ch. 10 portrays them as dealing with Assyria, not Judaea. I believe that shifting the object of the prophecy stems from ideological considerations. Verse 16 describes God causing his fatted ones to become emaciated, which leaves his fertile land seeming as though consumed by fire.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, this image changes in v. 17. God no longer sends the fire; rather, God Himself is described as a consuming fire, a burning and destructive flame: "וְהָיָה אוֹר־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֵשׁ וּקְדוֹשׁוֹ לְלֶהָבָה וּבָעֲרָה וְאָכְלָה שִׁיתוֹ וּשְׁמִירוֹ בְּיוֹם אֶחָד" , ‘The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers.’[[29]](#footnote-29) The expression "אור ישראל"*,* the ‘Light of Israel,’ is singular and enigmatic, appearing only here. This led some scholars to suggest textual emendations such as "אביר ישראל" or "צור ישראל".[[30]](#footnote-30) However, the analogy to the word וקדושו (his ‘holy one’), a term that hints at the familiar appellation קדוש ישראל, the ‘holy of Israel,’ led most exegetes and scholars to understand it as referring to God.[[31]](#footnote-31) This is a play on the words אוֹר and אוּר, ‘light’ and ‘fire’: Instead of being a shining light that benefits Israel, God turns himself into a burning fire that consumes them.[[32]](#footnote-32)This description of God as a burning fire raises a theological difficulty, as it presents a problematic aspect of God’s divinity, that of one who harms and consumes, perhaps even uncontrollably. God is not only described as fire, but as directing this fire toward His people.[[33]](#footnote-33) This difficulty urged the redactor to incorporate this prophecy (vv. 16-19) into ch. 10, thus changing its object. Instead of describing God as burning and consuming His people, it now describes how He consumes their enemies.

**‘He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax’ – vv. 33-34**

Curiously, the same phenomenon is also present in 10:33-34. Here, too, the identity of the tall trees is ambiguous. Who are these might trees whom God will cut down במערצה, in a frightful manner[[34]](#footnote-34) – Assyria, or Judaea?

This question touches upon the issue of the unit’s borders. Some scholars view these verses as belonging to the previous unit (10:5-34).[[35]](#footnote-35) According to this demarcation, the prophecy speaks of Assyria. Their hand is already reaching from Nob toward the Temple Mount, though at the last moment, the Lord of Hosts will cut down the lofty ones and halt the Assyrian attack. In contradistinction, other scholars believe that these verses belong to the “Shoot of Jesse” prophecy (10:33-11:9). According to them, the words ‘Therefore the Lord, the Lord of Hosts’ form the beginning of a new prophecy, like the opening of the prophecy in 3:1.[[36]](#footnote-36) According to this demarcation, these verses seem to portend the downfall of Judaea. The description of the calamity is followed by consolation: the “Shoot of Jesse” will arise out of the felled tree and will flourish once more.

As in vv. 16-19, scholars also claimed that vv. 33-34 refer to Judaea; however, their current placement results in an ambiguity that allows the reader to understand them as referring to either Assyria or Judaea.[[37]](#footnote-37)

**The tree metaphor: three stages of development**

The felled tree metaphor goes through a very interesting development process.

At first, this metaphor is used to describe the disaster that will befall Judaea. Isaiah employs this metaphor to describe the great calamity, alongside the notion of the remnant, which is a cornerstone of his doctrine. Destruction will come but will not be complete; a few trees will remain, few enough for a child to count. The felled tree is Judaea, God is the one who brings on the destruction (9:12), the One who fells the tree, while Assyria is described as the ax.

The second stage features a development in this metaphor: Assyria changes its role. Instead of an ax, it becomes a tall proud tree that is cut down or burnt. Verses 16-19, as well as vv. 33-34, which originally described the burning or destruction of Judaea, are integrated into ch. 10 and receive new meaning as referring to Assyria. However, in this stage, the roots of the tree still describe the future growth of Judaea.

I believe that the third stage appears in Dan 4. This stage incorporates an additional novelty: Not only does the tall tree symbolize the foreign king, but its roots do as well. The author of Dan 4 seems to be familiar with the “Shoot of Jesse” prophecy in its current place, and he interprets it while deliberately shifting the meaning of the metaphor: The tree roots no longer symbolize the redemption of Judaea, but rather the redemption of Nebuchadnezzar. This change makes us wonder: Why describe the hope for Nebuchadnezzar’s rehabilitation? Is this dream supposed to serve as a sort of consolation prophecy for Nebuchadnezzar?

I believe that to answer these questions, we must first attend to the historical figure that hides behind the character of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4.

**3.** **The roots of the tree describe Nebuchadnezzar (Nabonidus?)**

Various scholars throughout the twentieth century identified the historical figure of ‘Nebuchadnezzar’ as it appears in Dan 4 with king Nabonidus. They base this contention on Mesopotamian texts, claiming that the story was first told about Nabonidus and only later became adapted and shifted to Nebuchadnezzar.[[38]](#footnote-38) This claim is based on several facts. First, Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus, and not of Nebuchadnezzar (as described in Dan 5:11). Second, the historical sources show that Nabonidus was absent from Babylon for a period of ten years, which he spent in the Arabian desert, in the city of Tayma. This description dovetails with Nebuchadnezzar’s banishment from human company, for seven eras. In addition, Nabonidus was said to be different from the other Babylonian kings, being very interested in the topics of revelations and dreams. The descriptions of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams in chs. 2, 4, and 5 confirm this.[[39]](#footnote-39) In 1956 Milik published fragments of the “Prayer of Nabonidus” found in Qumran, which further supported the identification of Nebuchadnezzar with this king.[[40]](#footnote-40) These fragments, written in Aramaic, record the prayer of king Nabunai (Nabonidus) who was inflicted with leprosy and banished to Tayma for a period of seven years. The king testifies that for seven years he had prayed to the gods of gold and silver, believing them to be true deities; however, he was finally healed after praying to *El ‘Elyon* with the help of a Jew from among the exiles. Most scholars believe that the text of the “Prayer of Nabonidus” reflects an earlier stage of Dan 4, which was also originally written about Nabonidus.[[41]](#footnote-41) This prayer may help explain why the author chose to use the tree roots to symbolize Nebuchadnezzar: the story has a historical basis that describes Nabonidus’ reinstatement following a lengthy period of exile or banishment.

**Why was the figure of Nabonidus changed to that of Nebuchadnezzar?**

We now need to address the question of why the author (or redactor) of Dan 4 chose to replace the figure of Nabonidus with that of Nebuchadnezzar.

This may be based on a theological consideration. As Newsom correctly pointed out, having the great destroyer of the Temple eventually recognize the power and sovereignty of Israel’s God may help heal a deep cultural wound.[[42]](#footnote-42) Fewell similarly notes that the mention of Nebuchadnezzar would significantly affect the audience – the reader who is familiar with his historical figure as the destroyer of the Temple cannot but wonder at the words of praise this human, though practically omnipotent king, utters.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The story is uniquely presented as a missive that Nebuchadnezzar distributes to all the nations of his kingdom, describing his experiences in the first person, a style common in the ancient Near East. Kings used this medium to glorify their deeds, as found on many inscriptions within kings’ tombs;[[44]](#footnote-44) however, it is rarely found in the Bible.[[45]](#footnote-45) The author of Dan 4 chose this style to heighten the effect of Nebuchadnezzar’s words, granting them greater weight.

Four out of the six stories in Daniel conclude with the king glorifying God, and yet, Nebuchadnezzar’s words in Dan 4 are exceptional. The other stories have the foreign king praising God in relation to Daniel or his comrades: In Dan 2 Nebuchadnezzar praises God after witnessing Daniel’s ability to uncover the mystery and interpret his dream (2:47); in Dan 3 Nebuchadnezzar praises God for having sent an angel to rescue His servants who believe in Him (3:28); and in Dan 6 Darius puts out a missive in which he glorifies and praises Daniel’s God for saving Daniel from the lion’s den (6:27-28). In Dan 4, however, Nebuchadnezzar’s praise mentions neither Daniel nor his friends. Instead, he praises God’s ability to humiliate the haughty: ‘And those *who walk* in pride he is able to humble’ (4:34). Use of the verb ‘to walk’ מַהְלְכִין insinuates Nebuchadnezzar, who was earlier described as ‘walking’ ("מְהַלֵּךְ") on the roof of his royal palace (4:27).

**From enemy to beloved: consequences of transforming Nebuchadnezzar’s character**

While the author changed Nebuchadnezzar’s image in Dan 4 for theological purposes, nevertheless, this change entails consequences. Nebuchadnezzar suddenly switches from his role as Israel’s bitterest enemy to a positive character, a type of ‘repentant.’ According to the MT, Jeremiah calls Nebuchadnezzar ‘my servant’: ‘Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; I will make even the wild animals subject to him’ (Jer 27:6).[[46]](#footnote-46) Just as Assyria is likened to a rod and a staff, serving as God’s messenger, so Nebuchadnezzar is called His servant. God gave him all his lands, as well as the beasts of the field. Dan 4 takes this a step further: While Jer 27 describes Nebuchadnezzar as one who receives the beasts of the field from God, in Dan 4 it is Nebuchadnezzar who turns into such a beast. Furthermore, while Jer 27 describes Nebuchadnezzar as God’s servant in the sense of His messenger, or one who is subordinate to God, in Dan 4 he is described as repentant, as one who serves God.

Nebuchadnezzar glorifying God causes his character in Dan 4 to completely deviate from his familiar image as the Temple’s destroyer. Readers experience dissonance when confronting these two characters. Various translators and exegetes could not handle this dissonance and so attempt to harmonize the two completely different characters, as already evident in the Septuagint. As in other chapters in Daniel, here, too, we find differences between the MT and the Septuagint.[[47]](#footnote-47) According to the Septuagint, Nebuchadnezzar’s sin led to his banishment from human company, including the changing of his heart from human to that of an animal. According to this version, Nebuchadnezzar’s sin was not a general one of hubris, but the more specific one of destroying God’s Temple. Some scholars therefore view this verse (22) as secondary to the MT, believing it to be an earlier interpretation that sought to resolve the readers’ dissonance by connecting these two different images of Nebuchadnezzar.

The later Sages, and Rashi in their wake, continue this exegetical trend. As part of positively presenting the character of Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 4, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar are shown to have a close relationship. When Daniel heard Nebuchadnezzar’s dream he was astonished, and frightened, so much so that in an odd instance of role reversal it was Nebuchadnezzar who tried to calm Daniel. ‘Then Daniel, known as Belteshazzar, said: “My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!”’ (v. 16). Daniel addressed Nebuchadnezzar as ‘My lord,’ and wished that his dream and its interpretation would come true for his enemies.

The Sages of the Midrash, as quoted by Rashi, cannot accept Daniel wishing such as thing for Nebuchadnezzar’s enemies, given that those enemies are Israel. They therefore reverse this verse and explain that the vocative ‘My lord’ was directed not at Nebuchadnezzar, but at God: ‘Our Sages said that “if only the dream applied to your enemies” addresses God. He raised his eyes to heaven and said “if only the dream applied to Your enemies,” and if you say that he addressed Nebuchadnezzar, how can that be possible, as Israel were Nebuchadnezzar’s enemies and how could Daniel curse them’ (Rashi on Dan 4:16, and also see BT *Shavuot* 35b). Rashi, based on the midrash, explains what caused him to explain the verse as he did and not adopt the simple reading. If the Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel is the same as the Nebuchadnezzar who destroyed the Temple, Daniel could not possibly wish for his dream to come true for his enemies, leaving no choice but to reverse the object of the verse. If so, Daniel is not addressing his words to the king but rather to God, requesting that Nebuchadnezzar’s dream come true for God’s enemy – meaning, for Nebuchadnezzar himself. This exegetical trend appears also later in the chapter. Daniel’s advice to Nebuchadnezzar in v. 24 also expresses Daniel’s loyalty to his king. Daniel wishes his king to avoid the upcoming calamity, or at least have his punishment deferred, and so advises him to give charity to the poor: “Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue” (4:24).

Rashi assumes that Daniel could not possibly have given this advice to Nebuchadnezzar out of a sincere desire to help him. Rather, he claims this is an attempt to benefit the exiled Judaeans: ‘Why did Daniel give Nebuchadnezzar good advice? He saw the poor downtrodden Israelite exiles begging [for food] and advised him [Nebuchadnezzar] to free them. He said, “These poor people whom you exiled are hungry; feed them.”’ And so he [Nebuchadnezzar] did: he opened his food stores and supported them for 12 months’ (Rashi on 4:24). In this verse, too, Rashi connects between the two – very different – images of Nebuchadnezzar.

**Conclusion**

This paper presented an example of inner-biblical interpretation. The author of Dan 4 interprets the Shoot of Jesse prophecy in Isaiah, alluding to two similar images: the image of encircling the tree’s roots with iron chains which, as we saw, is based on an erroneous inner-biblical interpretation, and the image of the roots which grow anew after the tree is felled, symbolizing the hope for renewed growth. Both the Shoot of Jesse prophecy in Isaiah and the narrative in Dan 4 employ the metaphor of the felled tree to propose a theological framework for addressing the expanding empires of their day.

Tracing this metaphor allowed us to identify its three stages of development. In the first, Assyria is likened to an ax that God wields, while the felled tree symbolized Judaea. Isaiah uses this to express a double message: first, Assyria is but a tool in God’s hands, and second, a message of hope that the upcoming destruction will not be total, but a remnant will be spared. In the second stage, the role of Assyria changes: instead of an ax they are now the tall tree. Since they are haughty and do not recognize their role as God’s messengers, they will be cut down. This stage is reflected in vv. 16-19 and 33-34, following their insertion into the prophecy in ch. 10. The incorporation of these prophecies into their current place gave them new meaning, and they can now be understood as referring to Assyria. The result of incorporating these verses into the prophecy and shifting their meaning created a ‘middle stage’ that lends the metaphor a compound meaning: while the tall tree symbolizes Assyria, its roots symbolize the future renewal of the Shoot of Jesse (11:1).

I believe that Dan 4 forms the third, and final, stage. Here both the tree and its roots symbolize Nebuchadnezzar. This stage is a natural one, for both the tree and its roots symbolize the same entity. However, it creates a real transformation. The author of Dan 4 does not only present the rising empire as an ax that does not know its role, but goes a step further by turning the great threat, the man who destroyed God’s Temple, into one who glorifies God. Therefore, Nabonidus is replaced with Nebuchadnezzar. This is also why this story is told in a unique form of a missive that Nebuchadnezzar distributes throughout his kingdom, relating his experiences in the first person.

It seems that Dan 4 strives to describe God’s greatness from Nebuchadnezzar’s viewpoint, following what he experienced on his own body. Switching the felled tree metaphor and the symbolic meaning of its renewed roots from a description of the restoration of the Shoot of Jesse to a description of the restoration of Nebuchadnezzar and his reinstatement was intended to serve this purpose.

1. See Osborne, who discusses the ‘tree-king’ metaphor in the Bible and in the ancient Near East. W.R. Osborne, *Trees and Kings – A Comparative Analysis of Tree Imagery in Israel’s Prophetic Tradition and the Ancient Near East*,Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, in the parable of Jotham (Jud 9:6-21). We also find this in the parable of the eagle and the vine (Ezek 17:1-10), the parable of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), and the parable of the king of Babylon (Isa 14:3-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Isaiah uses these metaphors to provide his audience with a new understanding of their political situation, in wake of the rise of the Assyrian empire. This empire posed a formidable threat to Judaea’s existence. Will Judaea survive? And what can she do to ensure her future? Isaiah’s response to these questions was vague, however, he used the tree metaphor to contend with the following paradox: on the one hand, God intends to judge the people (and punish them); on the other hand, He also intends to redeem them. The imagery illustrates this: The tree must be felled and destroyed, but afterward it will enjoy renewed growth. See K. Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree – The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (JSOT 65) Sheffield, England 1989, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, Oxford: Clarendon 1985, 482-499; J. Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006, 14-23. Teeter finds inner-biblical interpretations of several of Isaiah's prophecies, such as 8, 10, 14, and 29, in the Dan 11 vision. He shows how Daniel uses the description of the Assyrian king to re-characterize Antiochus IV in his time. See: A. Teeter, “Isaiah and the King of As/Syria in Daniel’s Final Vision: On the Rhetoric of Inner-Scriptural Allusion and the Hermeneutics of ‘Mantological Exegesis,’” in: E. Mason, S. Thomas, et al. (eds.), *A Teacher for All Generations*: Leiden 2012, 169-199. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Lester’s comprehensive study: G.B. Lester, *Daniel Evokes Isaiah – Allusive Characterization of Foreign Rule in the Hebrew-Aramaic Book of Daniel* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 606) London: Bloomsbury 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The fourth chapter of Lester’s book is devoted to the connections between Isaiah and the first part of Daniel: He mentions the similarities between Dan 2 and Isa 41, 45; Dan 3 and Isa 43; Dan 1 and Isa 49. See Lester, *Daniel*, 107-133. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M. Segal, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions: Textual, Contextual and Intertextual Approaches to the Book of Daniel*, Berlin-Boston 2016, 112-114; Y. Zakovitz, “‘Etz ha-Daat Hu ‘Etz ha-Hayyim?” in: R. Elior (ed.), *Gan ‘Eden mi-Kedem – Masorot Gan ‘Eden be-Yisrael u-va-‘Amim* (Hebrew), Jerusalem 2010, 63-70 (p. 68 n. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For detailed descriptions of this and other proposed divisions see N. Golan, *Sippurei Daniel – Nituah Sifruti shel Daniel 1-6* (Hebrew), PhD Diss., Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University 2017, 130-136. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Saadia b. Yosef, *Daniel ‘im targum u-ferush Rabbeinu Saadia Gaon ben Yosef u-ferush Rabi Tanhum ha-Yerushalmi ve-heleq ha-diqduq le-Maharitz* (trans. by D. Kapah), Jerusalem 1981, 79-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Oxford, 1929), p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. L. F. Hartman and A.A. DiLella, *The Book of Daniel* (AB, 23) New York 1978, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. M. Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: the Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4*, Leiden 1999, 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. J. J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia 16) Philadelphia 1993, 84-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Y. Zakovitch, *Abi’ah hidot mimi qedem*, Tel Aviv 2005, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. J. J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia, 16) Philadelphia 1993, 226; M. Henze, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar: the Ancient Near Eastern Origins and Early History of Interpretation of Daniel 4*, Leiden 1999, 88-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Henze (1999), 79; Collins (1993), p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Segal (2016), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Henze and Segal posit that these differences preclude any conclusions regarding our case. Segal, ch. 4, 108; Henze, *Madness*, 86-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. M. Segal, *Dreams, Riddles and Visions: Textual, Contextual and Intertextual Approaches to the Book of Daniel*, Berlin-Boston 2016, 114. Zakovitch claims that the author of Dan 4 understood the verb נק"פ in the sense of ‘tying,’ as in Isa 3:24: “Instead of a sash, a rope [*naqfa*] – *naqfa* is a rope used for tying. Y. Zakovitch, “’Etz ha-da’at hu ‘etz ha’hayyim?” in: R. Elior (ed), *Gan ‘Eden miqeddem – masorot Gan ‘Eden be-Yisrael u-ve-‘amim*, Jerusalem 2010, 63-70 (p. 68 n. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. S. Z. Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1-39*, Atlanta 2017, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. M. Chan, "Rhetorical and Usurpation: Isaiah 10: 5-34 and the Use of Neo-Assyrian Royal Idiom in the Construction of an Anti-Assyrian Theology", *JBL* 128, 4 (2009), 717-733. See especially 718-719; 728-729. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The word “therefore” appears in the MT and creates a link of causation: Assyria took pride in their actions, and therefore receive their punishment. As opposed to this, the Septuagint includes the words “καὶ οὐχ οὕτως, ἀλλὰ,” which can be rendered “not so,” as conjunctions that express a connection of contrast. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The section remains coherent even without these verses; v. 24 seems to directly follow v. 15. See: H. Wilderberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (trans. T. H. Trapp), Minneapolis 1991, 429-431; H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-27* (ICC), London and New York 2018, 537-542. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. As early as 1780, Koppe claimed that this prophecy was originally about Judaea. See H. Wilderberger*, Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (trans. T. H. Trapp), Minneapolis 1991, 429; and also J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, (Hermeneia), Minneapolis 2015, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The central metaphor is that of the burning forest, but the words chosen to convey this metaphor can also be understood in a different sense. The word ‘emaciation’ (רָזוֹן) is used to describe the paucity of the earth’s bounty, but it can also describe human emaciation. See: H. Wilderberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (trans. T. H. Trapp), Minneapolis 1991, 429; H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-27* (ICC), London and New York 2018, pp.427-428. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a more detailed comparison see K. Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree – The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah*, (JSOT 65), England 1989, 194-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. A. Horovitz, “Khiasmus diakhroni be-Ivrit ha-mikra’it,” in: B. Oppenheimer (ed), *Hamiqra ve-toledot Yisrael: Mehkarim ba-miqra u-ve-safrut bayit sheni le-zikhro shel Yaakov Liver*, Tel Aviv 1972, 248-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Wilderberger (1991), 430. The word משמנו can be understood in more than one way. The emaciation metaphor may lend it the sense of a corpulent individual, implying health (for example, Jud 3:17), whose body heat rises as if on fire. The conflagration metaphor משמנו can refer to the fertile land, andרָזוֹן may describe a waning of the fertile areas (compare "ומה הארץ השמנה היא אם רזה", ‘How is the land? Is it fertile or poor,” Num 13:20). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. This is true if we understand the expression “אור ישראל” the ‘Light of Israel,’ as referring to God, based on the parallelism to “קדושו,” their ‘Holy One,’ which presumably means the Holy One of Israel. Most exegetes understood this expression as referring to God. Rashi alone explains otherwise, positing that"אור ישראל" is a sobriquet for the Torah. He posits that the word "קדושו" indeed refers to God, however, he also offers an additional option, wherein it refers to the righteous of each generation. See also Tur-Sinai who believes that אור ישראל, even when paired with וקדושו, cannot refer to the God of Israel but rather to one of the nation’s false deities… The expression, according to 8:12, indicates that which the nation consecrates to a foreign deity, and not to the God of Israel. According to this, the word "אור" here indicates an accursed thing [from the root אר"ר, curse] and not to something truly holy.” N.H. Tur-Sinai, *Peshuto shel miqra*, vol. 3, Jerusalem 1967, 41 (translation mine). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For a discussion of the various emendations see Wilderberger, *Isaiah*, 429. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, (Hermeneia), Minneapolis 2015, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. A similar description of God using the metaphor of fire appears in a prophecy in Isa 30:27-33, "הִנֵּה שֵׁם ה' בָּא מִמֶּרְחָק בֹּעֵר אַפּוֹ וְכֹבֶד מַשָּׂאָה שְׂפָתָיו מָלְאוּ זַעַם וּלְשׁוֹנוֹ כְּאֵשׁ אֹכָלֶת", ‘See, the Name of the Lord comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire’ (v. 27), however in this case the fire is turned against Assyria: "כִּי־מִקּוֹל ה' יֵחַת אַשּׁוּר בַּשֵּׁבֶט יַכֶּה", ‘The voice of the Lord will shatter Assyria; with His rod He will strike them down’ (v. 33). On this issue see Y. Knohl, *Emunot ha-miqra*, Jerusalem 2007, 73-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. According to the Septuagint (μετὰ ἰσχύος) and 1QIsaa the word "במערצה" should be read as an adverb, meaning ‘frightfully.’ Duhm proposed emending the word to במעצד (meaning iron), reading this word as a noun. See B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja übersetzt und erklärt* (HKAT), Göttingen 1922, p.----. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, for example, J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39*, (AB 19), New York 2000, 21; J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah*, (Hermeneia # ), Minneapolis 2015, 175; H. Wilderberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (Trans. by T. H. Trapp), Minneapolis 1991, 456-458. For a survey of the scholars who demarcate the prophecy in this manner see Williamson, 629 n. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-27* (ICC), London and New York 2018, 629, 638. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Williamson, 637. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. C. A. Newsom and B. W. Breed, *Daniel, A Commentary* (OTL), Kentucky 2014, 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. J. J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Hermeneia, 16), Philadelphia 1993, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. J. T. Milik, "Prière de Nabonide et autres écrits d'un cycle de Daniel", *RB* 63 (1956) 407-415; D. N. Freedman, "The Prayer of Nabonidus", *BASOR* 145 (1957), 31-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. E. Haag, *Die Errettung Daniels aus der Löwengrube: Ursprung der bibkischen Danieltradition* (SBS, 110), Stuttgart 1983, 62-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. C. Newsom, "Now You See Him, Now You Don't: Nabonidus in Jewish Memory", in: D.V. Edelman and E. Ben Zvi (eds.) *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods,* Oxford 2013, 270-282 (281). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. D. N. Fewell*, Circle of Sovereignty: A Story of Stories in Daniel 1-6,* Sheffield 1988, 133-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. F. Polak, *HaSippur ba-miqra – behinot be-‘itzuv u-ve-omanut*, Jerusalem 1994, 321-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The “hero narrator” is found in a few places in the Bible, such as Neh 1:1-7:5, 12:27-43, 13:4-31; Ez 7:28-8:36, 9:1-15. This category can also include the maiden’s dream in Song 5:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See also Jer 25:9, 43:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The Septuagint exhibits a far greater connection to Ezek 31. It also does not include the motif of competition between Daniel and the other wise men over the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. It seems that the competition motif appears in the Septuagint in the dream of the statue (Dan 2). On this see N. Golan, *Sippurei Daniel – nituah safruti shel Daniel 1-6*, PhD diss., Ramat Gan 2017, 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)