

The Striding Lion



Life is very boring here in the Royal Ontario Museum. I am in the corner of a room of exhibits from the Middle East, and most of the people passing by have no idea who I am. The exhibition lighting falls on my glazed tiles, all 122cms by 183cms of them, and occasionally I think I can feel the sun again, warming the clay of which I am made. But this is a museum, and the temperature is ruthlessly controlled, so that I am never too hot and never too cold. The awkward angles of the room I am in, in an awkward angled, white concrete and glass extension to the original Art Deco building, means that people have to come to find me and I am not as exciting as the dinosaurs. I am the Striding Lion; forever pictured with one front paw confidently out in front of me, head raised, mouth open to roar, as if I am going somewhere; but I am forever going nowhere. However, I have seen things the dinosaurs have never seen, and I can tell you stories of kings and princes. How about three Kings; Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius; and a prince among men, Daniel?

I was created on the whim of Nebuchadnezzar, the second of the name. He was one of the longer reigning Kings of Babylon. He made the most of his longevity by

building Temples to the Babylonian gods, bridges, a lake to provide drinking water, a port and most famously the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. He also completed the Palace fit for a King, which had been started by his father. In the palace was a Ceremonial Hall, and it was there that I and my companions could be found striding around the walls, a visible reminder of the power and fighting ability of the king, and of Ishtar, goddess of love and war, who was usually portrayed with a bow in her hand, in a chariot drawn by seven lions. How I would have loved to have been one of those lions.

Nebuchadnezzar was a ruthless ruler who set out to increase the influence of his kingdom, and for the purposes of my story it is the capturing of Jerusalem in 597BC, and the taking of King Jehoiakim captive, which is the important event. His people were not happy with their new Babylonian rulers, and rebelled again 10 years later. After putting down the rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar brought back with him from Jerusalem, the cream of the young nobility, which he then had educated in the Babylonian way. Among those he brought back were Daniel, Hanania, Mishael and Azaria. The Babylonians had difficulty in getting their tongues around the names so they renamed Hanania, Shadrach; Mishael, Meshach and Azaria, Abednego.

They were all quiet and studious young men. They were not bowed by where they were or in whose company they found themselves. They were supremely confident in something, which, as I discovered, was their God, Yahweh. When they first arrived, in his name they refused to eat the meat given them, which had been sacrificed to the Babylonian gods. Their tutors were worried that they would become ill, only eating vegetables and fruit, but the young men persuaded them to let them try, and if they became unwell or undernourished, then they would eat the meat. After several months it became clear that their diet agreed with them, and that they were healthier and stronger than their companions, so they were allowed to continue with it. They grew in wisdom and strength, and eventually became firm favourites at court.

Nebuchadnezzar was a man who believed that his dreams were important, and he had a number of wise men in his court whose job it was to interpret his dreams. On one occasion, I remember that he had a dream that his wise men said was impossible to interpret. He was so furious that he summoned his guards, and was about to order them to kill all the wise men at court, including Daniel and his friends, when Daniel spoke up and said that he knew what the dream meant. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of an enormous statue with a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of clay. Daniel explained that Yahweh had told him that the statue symbolised four successive kingdoms, starting with Nebuchadnezzar's, all of which would be crushed by God's kingdom, which would endure for ever. Nebuchadnezzar, after being silent for a very long while, accepted the interpretation, acknowledged the authority of Yahweh, and gave Daniel and his friends positions of authority around the kingdom.

I am sure that Nebuchadnezzar was a bit frightened by Daniel and his friends. There was another time when he threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into a fire for refusing to bow to a golden statue of him. He knew that they would refuse, he had had many conversations over the years with them, so he knew what their reaction would be, but he seemed to lose his mind a bit, or his power went to his head. He was sorry as soon as he had had his guards throw them in the furnace. He ordered the doors to be opened, and would have jumped in to rescue them himself, except that looking through the door, with his hands shielding his face from the heat, he could see the three of them walking around and talking, as cool as you please, and a fourth figure walking and talking with them. When the time of punishment was over, he called them out and embraced them, and for a second time promised to respect Yahweh.

I think that he must have forgotten his promises fairly quickly as he had another dream, which only Daniel could interpret. This time he was told that he would become mad for seven years and live like a beast. At the end of the seven years, he once again accepted the authority of Yahweh.

Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar was a bit of a wild young man who spent more time eating, drinking, feasting and whoring than looking after the kingdom his father had handed to him on his death. His downfall came the year the Medes and the Persians set a siege around Babylon. Belshazzar was so confident that they would never get through the walls, and that the city's food supply would last, that he threw a feast for a few hundred of his closest friends. When they got really drunk, someone suggested that they drink from the vessels of the Israelite Temple, which had always been kept locked in the royal vaults. Belshazzar ordered them to be brought to him. Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego protested but they were overruled. They left the feast rather than see their sacred vessels so debased. I could see that as they left they were worried about what might happen, but even they did not expect a hand to appear from nowhere and a finger spitting fire to carve in the wall the words 'Mene, Mene Tekel Upharsin'. The last word nearly caught my tail on fire! Belshazzar was so angry at Daniel for walking out of his feast, that he called all of his wise men, apart from Daniel to try and read the writing. Eventually the Queen pleaded with him to call Daniel, who came, stood and read the writing, and calmly informed the Belshazzar that Yahweh had declared that he had judged him and found him to be wanting, so the city would fall to the besieging forces and his kingdom would be divided between the Medes and Persians. Where his father would have asked what he could do to make things right again, Belshazzar after going very white, picked up one of the vessels, toasted Daniel to his face, and drank the contents. By the next morning he was dead, and the invading soldiers had overrun the city.

Darius the Mede was given the kingship of Babylon. He recognised the abilities of Daniel and his friends, and that they were held in Babylon as hostages for their

countrymen. He raised them to high office. But he too fell for a trick of his courtiers, who were jealous of Daniel. They persuaded him to issue an edict that he had now become a god, and that he was the only one to whom prayers should be addressed. Darius had forgotten that Daniel prayed daily to Yahweh, and no edict was going to change that. When the jealous courtiers came back to Darius, and gleefully reported that Daniel was still praying to Yahweh, Darius had no choice but to punish him, for the law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed even by the King.

He had to carry out the punishment proscribed, which was to be thrown into the den of lions, which Darius had kept since the overthrow of Belshazzar. Through the night I watched as Darius paced around the Ceremonial Hall crying out to Yahweh to protect his friend, cursing us lions on the walls, as if it were our fault Daniel was in such trouble. As soon as dawn began, Darius ordered the lions den to be opened, and was beside himself when Daniel walked out completely unharmed. When he questioned Daniel, he was told that Yahweh had stopped the lions mouths, and that he, Daniel, had had a lovely restful night, thank you. Darius was so relieved for Daniel on the one hand, and so angry at his conniving courtiers on the other, that he ordered them to be thrown to the lions along with their wives and children. I think that they were the best meal those lions had had in a long time.

I am sure that Daniel had other adventures, but over the centuries I have forgotten what they are. As the years passed by, the Ceremonial Hall became old fashioned and went out of use. The roof caved in, and the sands of the desert filled the remains, and levelled off the land again. We were forgotten about, until Robert Koldewey began to excavate nearby in 1899. By 1917 he had uncovered much of the remains of the palace including the Ceremonial Hall, and had removed me piece by piece back to Berlin. I was purchased by the Royal Ontario Museum in 1937, packaged up and sent here, where I remain for daily inspection by the unknowing hordes. Apart from the occasional visitor who does recognise who and what I am!