

“A Tale of Two Visions, From Empire to Earth Community”  
Daniel 7: 9-14, 27,

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There is no book in the Old Testament like the book of Daniel, which has tantalized historians, biblical scholars, and dare I say not a few religious extremists, especially among Zionists as well as Christian fundamentalists. The Book of Daniel is fraught with danger and difficulty when it comes to interpretation. On the one hand are conservatives, who attempt to literally interpret the images and numbers (ten horns, three and a half years, seventy weeks), and attempt to interpret the book of Daniel as a future end time struggle between antichrist and messiah.

On the other hand, there are historians who seek to understand the historical significance of the four beasts and the four metals, and many seek to come up with a link to the great empires of biblical times, including the four kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. Others start with Assyria, and others still think that writer of “Daniel,” writing perhaps in the second century BCE in Hellenistic times, not in a sixth century exile, had in mind Alexander the Great’s generals, not the Roman Empire. For the Book of Daniel, speculation abounds.

I would like to simplify the matter, and argue that what Daniel was writing about not so much a *succession* of empires, but rather he was more concerned with the *struggle* with empire. Hence, whether Daniel was writing in the sixth century from Babylon or from the second century in Jerusalem; or whether the abomination of desolation (desecration of the temple) was done by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BCE or a future

antichrist, is less the issue. The real issue is how a given people of God deal with oppression, and enslavement in the context of empire. The real question is how Daniel survived the sorrows and persecution of imperial jurisdictions.

Perhaps I will say some things about Daniel, and then you can make up your mind. Then, I will try to say something about alternatives to empire, my real focus with you this morning. First, the story of Daniel.

While we are not sure if Daniel deserves the title of prophet, the book of Daniel, nonetheless, is found among the major prophets, not the minor ones. It is listed following Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. There is a “Daniel” mentioned in Ezekiel, and the story of Daniel lives on in the New Testament as well. Further, much of the imagery in the Book of Daniel’s is borrowed in the book of Revelation, so that the story and the prophecy of Daniel is significant to the early biblical writers. Like the book of Revelation, Daniel is characterized as apocalyptic literature. It is filled with symbolism and imagery that can be interpreted in a variety of different ways. In our book of Daniel, the book begins with the story of Daniel’s situation.

I will tell the story a bit, since the story of Daniel is about how to survive in the context of empire. The date is 605 BC, and the Babylonians have just defeated Egypt at Carchemish, and at about the same time King Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem for a second or third time. Daniel is captured, and since he came from a noble family, he and several others are selected by the king as “competent to serve in the king’s palace.” There’s more: “The king (Nebuchadnezzar) commanded his palace master, Ashpenaz, to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with

knowledge and insight.” Tradition says that these young men, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, became eunuchs and servants to the king in the palace. The king ordered for them a diet of wine and food to fatten them up. But, Daniel objected, and he and his three friends preferred vegetables to eat and water to drink rather than the king’s rations. Daniel and three others continued to enjoy a vegetarian diet, and “to these four young men, God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all vision and dreams.” Daniel eventually became ruler over the province of Babylon, and was head over the wise man because of his ability. He was also able to appoint three men as his assistants, Shadrach, Meschak and Abed Nego. So, the hero was rewarded. According to the story, Daniel lived in Babylon for 72 years, including much of the entire reign of Nebuchadnezzar (45 year reign) and through the last Babylonian King, Belshazzar. According to legend, Daniel died two years after the Israelites were permitted to return to Babylon. Well, that’s the story, now for the book.

The Book of Daniel is divided into two sections, the first section, chapters one – six is about six stories, and the second section, chapters 7-12, is about Daniel’s visions. The stories are as follows.

1. Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of four metals, and states that these are four kingdoms or empires.  
Message- empires look pretty and tough but they come and go.
2. The second story is the fiery furnace story. In this story, Neb made a golden idol that was 70 feet high. When music was played by the state sponsored musicians, everyone was to bow before the idol. This was the first Patriot Act on record.

But, Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego didn't buy it and you all know the rest of the story.

Message- Idolatry brings few rewards.

3. The third story was that Daniel prophesied that the king would go mad for 42 months, and sure enough the King Neb ate grass like oxen and lived among wild beasts in the parks around the palace, but then repented, confessed Yahwe as the true god, and was healed. We all know stories of rulers losing their mind, intoxicated as they might be with their own hubris, and isolated by their own advisors. Even American imperial ambitions are made of clay feet.

Message- Empire can make you crazy.

4. The handwriting on the wall. In this story, Belshazzar takes out some of the trophies of the loot from the first Jerusalem temple. A hand appears and there is a saying on the wall that Daniel interprets. Daniel says that Beshazzaar will die and the Babylonian empire will come to an end. That night Beshazzaar is murdered, and Darius the Mede (read Cyrus the Great?) takes over and establishes another empire.

Message- it's a good thing if you can read the handwriting on the wall.

5. Daniel becomes a favorite to Darius, and because he doesn't worship the king, is thrown into the den of lions. Jealous conspirators tricked the king to punish Daniel by saying to the King that Daniel worshiped another God, and must be punished because: "it is the law of the Medes and Persians... and no interdict or ordinance that the king established can be changed." Since Daniel survived, to the king's delight, the conspirators were then thrown to the lions.

Message- Good deeds and personal integrity has its rewards.

As a person, Daniel is a good example of how to coexist with empire. Daniel never gives up his own lifestyle, or his own religion. Even so, he is of great service to the king because of his education, administrative skill and high intelligence. Further, he is not afraid to speak truth to power, and not afraid to advocate for the less fortunate. He is not a revolutionary, but a faithful servant, and his integrity as a person is beyond dispute.

The second half of the book is about Daniel's vision. I would like to suggest that there are really only two visions in the book of Daniel, one vision is all about empire and other one is all about an alternative. I would like to re read from Daniel 7: versus 12-14, and verse 21. Note, the alternative is an inclusive reign, it never ceases and transcends empire, and it is for the people, not just for the well born or those in power.

Regardless of how historical is the story of Daniel, or how well we are able to identify the empires and kingdoms that are mentioned symbolically in this book, it is clear that Daniel lived in the context of empire. Empires are of course splendid little relics. As a friend of mine said of the Roman Colliseum, "what a magnificent ruin!" And ruins they are. Babylon, for example is reputed to have had 60 miles of walls that were 300 feet high and 80 feet thick- rather impenetrable. The city was split by the Euphrates river, a source of life for the city, and also a point of vulnerability. The Medes slipped into the city via the river, not over the walls as you may recall.

For David C. Korten, empires have fatal flaws. In his new book, *The Great Turning, from Empire to Earth Community*, the following are characteristics of empire

1. Life is hostile and competitive
2. Humans are flawed and dangerous

3. Order is by domination and is hierarchical
4. Ethics- is compete or die
5. you should love and seek *power*
6. individual rights of the self are paramount over communal rights
7. masculine is dominant

On the other end of the perspective is Earth Community. It's characteristics are as follows:

1. Life is supportive and cooperative, not competitive
2. Humans have many possibilities, including assets and gifts, and are not merely flawed and dangerous
3. Order can be achieved through partnership, whereas domination systems breed chaos and resentment
4. "Cooperate and live" has more possibility than "compete or die."
5. Love life is better than love power
6. Defense of the rights of all is the best guarantee of individual rights
7. Gender balance is more fruitful, just and sane than masculine domination.

Empire and Earth Community thus represent contrasting world views. A week ago I was in Nicaragua for the VII international conference of IAPCHE (International Assn for the Promotion of Christians in Higher Education). There were 135 delegates from 135 nations, and the delegates represented five distinct regions of the world. I gave a paper on the subject of a "shalom view of the world," and with it came a critique of empire, and my particular understandings of pluralism (when it undermines harmony) of secularism

(when it undermines mystery and metaphor) and fundamentalism (especially those isms that choose literalistic dogmas over understandings that in my view are more life giving)

What I learned in Nicaragua, a desperately poor country, is first of all how beautiful students are in any country, and how people in any nation can be welcoming and hospitable to strangers such as myself. Hosted by the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua, a Baptist institution, I was blown away by my hosts, and by a set of wonderful students. In the midst of a rainstorm, the students fanned out inviting our group to board a bus that would take us but four blocks away to our housing.

The delegates were distinguished as coming from five regions in the world, and each brought with him or her a set of skills that could be grouped.

From the Asians delegates, I learned the value of seeing how opposites fit into a complex whole. Dr. Ming, a teacher from Hong Kong, argued that cross cultural education from a Christian perspective should be characterized by six concepts: These are Bridging, light, salt, transcendence, incarnation and globalization. Our message should be able to bridge across cultures, give light to the nations, become salt so as to preserve society, should be transcendent- not belonging to any one culture, should be incarnational, immersed in all cultures, and should be global- found through out the world. For me, the Asian ability to see the whole picture, and to see unity in diversity was a gift to earth community.

From an African perspective, I learned that the village or the community was more important than an individual. In Africa, it is not, I think therefore I am, it is rather, "I am known in my community, therefore I am." The Africans at the conference were

nonetheless troubled by western secularism and the legacy of colonialism. Yet, their enthusiasm and spirituality, and sense of community was a gift to us all.

The Europeans at the conference came from England, the Netherlands, Germany, Russia and Hungary. Despite the threats of immigration, pluralism, and the loss of tradition, what I heard from the Europeans was the importance of developing a civil society amid pluralism and difference. Speaker after speaker spoke of communicating across cultures and in the midst of a pluralist society. Professor Gaanzevoort, for example, from the Netherlands, argued against triumphalism that typically characterized Christianized societies on the one hand; and he argued against relativism that typically characterizes secular societies such as in his Amsterdam, on the other hand. Rather, Prof Gaanzevoort argued for a committed pluralism where people worked from their own perspective for positive diversity and for a society that welcomed pluralism. The European understanding of civil society is a gift to the global earth community.

Because of the location in Nicaragua, most of the countries represented came from Central and from Latin America. In my paper on shalom, Dr. Jose Alcantara from Mexico critiqued it saying that if we leave shalom as a concept, and don't act on it, then the peace envisioned may never be realized. Jose went on to say that shalom without justice isn't really shalom. I agreed and welcomed his critique. The Latin Americans present brought with them a critical view of empire, and of the political and economic dominance that empire engenders. For some, their critique is extended to gender balance, even though others are still wrestling with machismo-- male dominated cultural systems. Still, Latin Americans bring with them a critique of the world, of empire, and of US cultural dominance that is important to the body politick and to Earth Community.

The North American contingent was the fifth group of people present. There were no Middle Easterners, and but one or two Aussies who were linked up with either Europe or to North America. Doug Blomberg, for example is an Aussie, but teaches in Toronto at the Institute of Christian Studies. The North Americans have the burden of founding the IAPCHE, and are working on letting go of their control of it. IAPCHE elected Dr. Alcantara, a Mexican theologian and educator, as the next President, a step in the right direction. Dr. Alcantara's election as President of the group was unanimously applauded. My experience of the North American contingent is that we bring resources, money, power, and influence to the table, and perhaps we bring also a pragmatic knowhow of how to get things done and how to build and maintain organizations. Still, my critique of the North American presence in Nicaragua is that we were less than self-critical about our connection to wealth and to the power of empire in the world. Also, we need to learn how to be more open minded and more open to the perspectives of other world leaders. We need to offer parity at the table, not dominance and control. Still, North Americans bring much to the table, and we could bring even more if we are more able to be self critical on the one hand, and more open to hearing how we are perceived in global contexts, on the other hand. The regions of the world, for C. Rene Padilla, represents what he calls the "many faceted wisdom of God." That is what I experienced in Grenada Nicaragua a week ago.

A shalom world view, well being for the earth community, is worth pursuing. I agree with David Korten that the possibilities of earth community are more hopeful than the trappings of empire. I believe that Daniel faced much of the same dilemma as we do

today, how do we live in the context of empire and the hegemonic control and presence in the world as developed nations?

For Daniel, empires come and go. They are built and stand upon clay feet which eventually crumble to the ground. Eventually, all empires fall flat on their face due to their own weight. This was true of Rome, Great Britain, and the US is feeling it now in Iraq. Empires are fixed, finite, and their time is limited. In contrast, the prospects of earth community are transcendent and timeless. Daniel knew that the kingdom of God would one day embrace all nations, all languages, all peoples and all races and cultures. While empires are exclusive and combative, earth community is inclusive and open to others. Empires are based on wealth and power, usually military power, whereas earth community is based on compassion and mutuality. At the end of history is the hope that the empires will cease, and that dominion will once again be given to the people. The hope that we have is that such a reign will be everlasting, universal, and available to all people regardless of race or social station. Such is the vision of earth community, and the critique of empire.

For David C. Korten, empire and earth community represent two oppositional stories, two all embracing narratives. He writes:

“Empire and Earth Community flow from sharply contrasting worldviews. The narrative of empire, which emphasizes the demonstrated human capacity for hatred, exclusion, competition, domination and violence in the pursuit of domination, assumes humans are incapable of responsible self-direction and that the social order must be imposed by coercive means.... The narrative of earth community, which emphasizes the demonstrated human capacity for caring, compassion, cooperation, partnership and

community at the service of life, assumes a capacity for responsible self-direction, and self-organizations and thereby the possibility of creating radically democratic organizations and societies. ... One focuses on that which divides us and leads to fear and often violent competition. The other focuses on that which unites us and leads to trust and cooperation.”

“The competing narratives,” writes Korten, “are also reflected in the range of qualities attributed to God in different cultures. At one extreme is the wrathful God of Empire who demands exclusive loyalty, favors one people over another, lives apart from [God’s] creation, rules through anointed earthly representatives, and extracts a terrible vengeance on ... enemies and ...[so-called] ‘unbelievers.’ At the other extreme is the universal loving God/goddess of Earth Community, the intrinsic, omnipresent living Spirit beyond gender that manifests itself in every aspect of Creation” (Korten, *The Great Turning, From Empire to Earth Community*, 33-34).