

A Kingdom Made Without Hands:

Living as a Community of Faith in an Unbelieving Culture Daniel 2:31-45

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Scholars have long noted that the abrupt switch from Hebrew to Aramaic in Daniel 2:4, and back to Hebrew in 8:1, appears to be arbitrary. Yet in the Aramaic section of Daniel, a theme is expressed repeatedly that is also fitting for the entire book. This theme is that the earthly transient kingdoms of this world will be replaced by the spiritual eternal kingdom of God (2:44, 4:3, 4:25b, 4:34, 6:26, 7:13-14, 7:27). Note this in merely a few important texts:

And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever (2:44 NRSV).

His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his sovereignty is from generation to generation (4:3).

For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end (6:26b).

I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed (7:13-14).

The theme of an impending eternal kingdom of God is no arbitrary coincidence in Daniel. The entire book, including the six court stories in chapters 1-6 and the four night visions in chapters 7-12, are all compatible with this theme. Daniel himself serves as a model for how to live with integrity and faithfulness as a religious minority in an unbelieving culture. Along with Abraham, Esther, Joseph, and other examples from the Bible, Daniel never rejects his role as a religious minority; he never asks God to removed him from such a setting, and his faithfulness in seemingly minor issues serves as a platform for faithfulness in weightier matters that would eventually threaten his very life. Yet Daniel holds onto the groundbreaking vision that this new kingdom will replace the repressive kingdoms of this world.

Crucial to this theme is King Nebuchadnezzar's dream followed by Daniel's interpretation in 2:31-45. Here the Babylonian king is troubled by a night vision about a huge figure, with a head of gold, chest of silver, belly and thigh of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and baked clay. Daniel's interpretation of the dream is that these symbols represent mighty earthly kingdoms, which ironically will all fade away, leading to God's eternal kingdom. Indeed, these kingdoms are listed in decreasing value. Each kingdom will first give way to another earthly power, then the last to an eternal kingdom.

As you looked on, a stone was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:34).

An Eternal Kingdom Not Made with Hands

Daniel's interpretation of the night vision describes this eternal kingdom in three ways. First it is a kingdom that is not made with human hands (vs. 34). It is a spiritual, not an earthly kingdom. This point is emphasized by the fact that the plot and interpretation of the dream are not given to the earthly wise men of Babylon but revealed to Daniel by God alone (2:27-28).

The Greek version of Daniel includes a humorous story, Bel and the Dragon, which illustrates this point. It also describes Daniel's existence as a religious minority, though in this case he is under Babylonian instead of Persian dominion. Day after day the Babylonians lavishly provide flour, sheep, and wine for their god Bel to consume. When challenged as to why Daniel did not participate in providing for this god, Daniel charged that Bel merely consisted of clay and bronze. Unconvinced, Nebuchadnezzar had the door to Bel's temple sealed after food provisions were left, so no human could sneak in and consume them. Nebuchadnezzar naively had no inkling that the 70 priests of Bel and their families were entering through another hidden entrance at night, consuming all the food. Daniel, however, was suspicious. Daniel secretly scattered ashes over the floor of the temple while in the king's presence, but away from the observation of the priests. The next morning all the food had vanished. The king was convinced that Daniel had been mistaken when he observed that no food remained. Yet, Daniel asked the king to look on the floor. There he saw the footprints of men, women, and children belonging to the priests of Bel. This story highlights that both the Hebrew and Greek versions of Daniel ridicule the earthly nature of Babylonian worship and contrast that with God's divine kingdom and power.

From here one can fast-forward to the New Testament. From the beginning of the gospels to their end, they uniformly portray John and Jesus as both preoccupied with the kingdom of God (Matt 3:2, 4:17, 12 18). Note Luke's account of the promise to Mary and note the eternal nature of that promise,

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:32-33).

There is no doubt that the imagery of the rock not made with human hands provides the background for the gospels, particularly the Gospel of Luke.ⁱ

The stone that the builders rejected will become the capstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed (Luke 20:18).

A Kingdom Which Crushes Earthly Kingdoms

Second, this kingdom crushes earthly kingdoms (vs. 34-35). What does this promise mean in a context of living as a minority community of faith in an unbelieving culture? Believers typically get sidetracked by becoming preoccupied with events in earthly kingdoms, yet God has a purpose beyond one's own or any other nation. For Christians, this promise does not necessarily mean that any particular nation will eventually be transformed into a Christian majority. If history is any record, that is usually wishful thinking among believers. One can hardly think of any example in the Bible where believers were the dominant culture. Yet instead, there are multiple biblical models as to how to live faithfully as a religious minority. Instead of the destruction of a secular government or power, the promise of crushing earthly kingdoms has to do with a spiritual, not an earthly domain. Jesus himself said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

But what would this crushing of earthly kingdoms look like from a spiritual perspective? Take the church in China as an example. The dramatic growth of the church in spite of widespread opposition and largely apart from foreign mission efforts is well documented.ⁱⁱ Ironically, much of the growth there has been triggered by political events that would nearly universally be described as detrimental to the gospel: the Cultural Revolution, the suppression of demonstrations at Tiananmen Square, and overall government scrutiny of religious groups.ⁱⁱⁱ In an unsuspected turn of events, such repressions like Tiananmen Square have disillusioned unbelieving intellectuals and driven them to consider spiritual options for their lives.

A Kingdom Which Fills the Entire Earth

Third, this stone became a great mountain that filled the whole earth. The metaphor of the growth of this mountain is similar to Jesus' kingdom parable of the mustard seed which filled the entire earth.^{iv} As cited above, Daniel 7:13-14 affirms that this kingdom will include peoples from all nations and languages. The book of Revelation also affirms such kingdom growth,

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God and they will reign on earth (Rev 5:9-10).

Another example of kingdom expansion is the growth of Christianity in Africa, with 8.5 million a year, or 23,000 a day in Africa converting to Christianity.^v In many cases this growth flourishes in spite of a context of political and religious oppression. Or perhaps

one could consider Mongolia, which started opening up in the early 1990's and had virtually no Christian presence. Now with about 400 churches and over 80,000 Christians, Mongolia illustrates just how this spiritual kingdom replaces earthly kingdoms, not in the realm of an earthly political *coup*, but in the quiet, or sometimes not so quiet expansion of believing communities.^{vi} These cases alone affirm tentative projections that in 20 years two thirds of all Christians will be in Asia and Africa.

The promise is that God's kingdom will spread and fill the earth is no mere eschatological phenomenon. God's sovereign power is alive and well today.^{vii}

An Invitation

Does the proposition that the kingdom of God is an eternal kingdom not made with human hands necessarily mean God has no plan for the nations? Certainly not! God uses earthly powers, godly and ungodly, to fulfill his purposes for his kingdom. Jeremiah, for example, commanded the exiles to seek the welfare of the physical kingdom where they lived. Yet one should want to ask, if only one kingdom is ultimately going to last forever, which is the most important kingdom that should be given priority?

The Bible issues an invitation to be part of something eternal. God calls humans to be a part of his spiritual kingdom, "pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:12). However, one can only be born into this divine kingdom (John 3:3). There is no other way to become a citizen.

An eternal kingdom means investing your life in eternal things: the Word of God, the nature of God, the kingdom of God. This means other things must take second place. Sadly, the spiritual all too often gives way to the tangible.

There is another way of restating the application of this text. Where you are going determines everything along the way. If you are headed in the wrong direction you may see all kinds of wonderful things, but you are still going in the wrong direction. Ironically, these wonderful things may be a distraction from God's divine kingdom, our ultimate goal. Alternatively, if you are headed in the right direction, even those difficulties along the way confirm that you are going where you need to go.

ⁱ Norman Hillyer, "Rock-Stone Imagery in 1 Peter," *Tyndale Bulletin* 22 (1971) 58-91.

ⁱⁱ "Christ in China: Sons of Heaven," *The Economist* (Oct 2, 2008); Evan Osnos, "Jesus in China: Christianity's Rapid Rise," *Chicago Tribune* (June 22, 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ For past as well as current hostilities, see Gerolamo Fazzini, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).

^{iv} Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel*, (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 80

^v Robert Nash, "Understanding and Promoting Religious Pluralism in College Campuses," *Spirituality in Higher Education*, Vol. 3, Issue 4, 2007, 1.

^{vi} "Mongolia," *Berita NECF* 11 (2009) 16.

^{vii} John Goldingay, *Daniel*, (Dallas: Word Publishers, 1989), 52.