

Somewhere over the rainbow: Daniel ch.8, Revelation ch.10

A warm welcome to new readers who have joined the TFTD mailing list. At the moment we're following the Morning prayer readings from Daniel and the book of Revelation. Don't worry if you find it all a bit confusing — we all do!



And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. Revelation 10.1

If you hit the right part of the internet, you'll find a meme going around called "Biblically accurate angels" (or so my grandson tells me). The point is, they aren't sugary-sweet, these angels — they're terrifying,

powerful and dangerous like natural forces. They keep cropping up in these chapters of Daniel and Revelation that we're reading at the moment. They belong to the visual grammar of a type of text called an "Apocalypse", a mixture of visions and revelations that twitch aside the curtain for a moment and reveal God's purposes for the world ("apocalypse" is simply the Greek word for "revelation"). Angels in the Bible are the messengers who explain to mystified mortals what the visions mean — but often their explanations are as puzzling as the visions themselves.

Watching these visions is a bit like watching a video projected on the big screen at a match or a pop concert. The big screen is meant to make it easier to grasp what's happening down below on stage or on the pitch: and the angel is a bit like the commentator who selects the key camera angles so you can see what's really going on inside the scrum. Or the screen might show a completely different image that helps you to hear the song or see the goal differently. Two different ways of seeing the same thing.

So in Daniel ch.8, the visions describe what is projected on the big screen — a kind of cartoon contest between two enormous animals, a ram and a goat. It's like watching a mating contest between two great stags at rutting time — you can just feel the juddering crash of those great horns locking together (ouch!). In fact they are exactly like cartoon characters, like the British Lion in those great political cartoons of the Victorian era — animals that stand for nations and rulers.

Because what Daniel's vision really wants to show us is what's happening on earth. The animals on the big screen represent the big

political forces rampaging over the little peoples that stand in their way — including the “beautiful land” (Dan 8.9), the land God gave to his people. The ram “charging westward and northward and southward” (Dan 8.4) represents the great empires of the east: Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and Darius and Cyrus. Daniel and his friends knew all about their destructive power.

The great he-goat from the west (v.5) stands for Alexander the Great (see Friday’s TFTD from Robin!), followed by the ruinous power-struggles between the generals who inherited Alexander’s empire and carved it up between them — the “four horns” of v.8. And the real subject of this chapter is the arrogant “little horn” (vv.9-14), which stands for Antiochus Epiphanes (215-164 BC), who founded Greek cities in his honour everywhere (that’s why there are so many cities called “Antioch”) and attempted to create a unified Greek culture all over the Middle East.

So what’s actually happening on the ground in this chapter has nothing to do with charging billy-goats and everything to do with politics — and how it feels on the ground to be at the receiving end of a cultural revolution. In fact we know quite a lot about this particular cultural revolution — you can read all about what happened in the First and Second Books of Maccabees in the Apocrypha. (Just read 1 Maccabees ch.1 for a quick summary). Antiochus marched into the Temple in Jerusalem, abolished the worship of God, and replaced the altar of God with an altar to the gods of the Greeks (including himself). Just out of interest (spoiler alert), it was the struggle against Antiochus that sparked the Maccabean revolt and the rise of Judas Maccabeus — and eventually the Jewish festival of Hannukah, which marks the

restoration of the temple and the daily sacrifices.

But Daniel doesn't know how all that's going to turn out — this chapter dates from 165 BC, right in the middle of the crisis, when the worship of God's Temple has been abolished and God's people are crying out "How long, O Lord?" (v.13). Right in the middle of the crisis, down in the mud and the sweat of the pitch, when you don't know how it's all going to turn out, is precisely when you need to look up to get the big picture, to remind yourself that "God is still on the throne, and he will remember his own." That's why the throne is such an important symbol of the sovereignty of God (as Linda reminds us tomorrow), and the ultimate triumph of God's loving purposes for the world.



And that's where the rainbow comes in (Sarah gave me this one for my garden). It's become a powerful symbol of hope in the Covid crisis, to

remind us of the caring work of the NHS and key workers, to lift our spirits and keep us looking up — up to a place “somewhere over the rainbow”, a place where dreams come true, where troubles melt like lemon drops and bluebirds fly. It’s a great song — but there’s more to the rainbow than dreams. In the Bible, the rainbow is part of the undergirding of God’s throne, the shimmering light that hides the ineffable majesty of the presence of God (see Ezekiel 1.28 and Revelation 4.3). And the rainbow reminds us that what undergirds God’s throne is not the lust for power but the passionate power of God’s mercy, a mercy that reaches out beyond the destructiveness of human sin to embrace the whole created order: “Behold, I set my bow in the clouds, as a sign of the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature that is on the earth” (Genesis 9.12-17). Now *that’s* a song worth singing!

*O God, by whose command the order of time runs its course,
forgive our impatience, perfect our faith:
and, while we await the fulfilment of your promises,
grant us a good hope because of your word:
through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.*

God bless, Loveday

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