



"Berrigan brings alive the biblical book of Daniel in an astonishing way. . . . The line between prose and poetry is erased, as is the line between the past and the present."

HOWARD ZINN

DANIEL

Under the Siege of the Divine

Daniel Berrigan

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of the Divine

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Under the Siege of the Divine

We speak of faith, and we are accustomed to ask: what has this fey, transcendental, religious thing to do with the hustle and bustle, the burn and iron of life? But it is there, as large and as hard as the everyday life of nations and human society.

In faith there is a need of a unique combination of sentiments and ideas, faith and questioning, seriousness and irony, illusion and reality. I call it the body of the sensibility of faith. It has taken several thousands of years to shape this sensibility for what it is—a complex, highly developed instrument for the handling of many things, birth, life, death, and faith itself. Faith, therefore, is not an isolated thing, limited to some secret place in the soul.

William Lynch, S.J.

Vocabulary

Show me a word I can use.

Show me one verb.

An adjective as clear as a ray of light.

Listen carefully to the bottom of every sentence,
to the attic and the dust in the furniture
of every sentence,

perk up your ears,
listen and look under the bed
of every sentence
at the soldiers waiting their turn
at the foot
of the bride's bed.

To preserve just one word.

What is it to be?

Like a question on a quiz show.

UNDER THE SIEGE OF THE DIVINE

If you could take one word with you
to the future,
what is it to be?

Find it.
Plunge into the garbage heap.
Stick your hands deep into the ooze.
Close your fist around the fragment of a mirror
fractured by feet that dance on what should have been
a wedding night.

Let me tell you something.
Even if I had been there
I could not have told their story.

I was calling from another country
and the phone was still busy.
I was trying to call home
and the machine had just swallowed
my last dime.

As for the story I cannot tell.
They accumulated tenderness
as others accumulated money.

Ask them.
Even if the phone is busy.
Even if the machine has just swallowed your last dime.

Even if the operator drowns out all the other voices.
Ask them for the verse our lovers will still need
if we are ever again to bathe
in the same river.

Let them speak for themselves.

from "Vocabulary" by Ariel Dorfman

The consummate artistry of this book! And yet, strange to our eyes, the artist Daniel is not included in the Hebrew bible

DANIEL

as a prophet. His book finds place there under a heading known as “Writings,” together with such versatilities as Psalms, Job, The Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and so on. Is the book then to be thought essentially unclassifiable? What do Jews make of Daniel? Ambiguity is the note in the Talmud. Yes, he is a prophet; no, he is not. Only Ezekiel has met with a colder official glance.

And yet, and yet. From the sixth century BCE, the era of events recounted here, to the second, the era of final redaction, one senses the mighty leap of midrash.* For Christians there is an open door and a firm embrace. The book makes sense, divine and human, in whatever time. The heroic example of Daniel and his community offers a perennial blessing. Centuries after his lifetime, in an equally awful era, he speaks up, strong and clear, on behalf of the victims of our lifetime.

Is Daniel a prophet? One can, at the least, claim that his example, if not his intuitions, merit the laurel. That faith of Daniel! A faith, to borrow from William Lynch, “as large and as hard as the everyday life of nations and human society . . . a complex, highly developed instrument for the handling of . . . life, death, and faith itself.” Daniel stood eye to eye with the powers, and survived. And what courage his survival exacted!

A further contention underlies the present commentary. Daniel’s story continues today, verified again and again in events both awful and hopeful. The book is premonitory of the methods of tyrants, whether ancient or modern; better still, it is a salubrious story that offers strong relief and insight. There are the principalities of today to be confronted, their idols and thrice-stoked furnaces and caves of lions, their absurd self-serving images and rhetoric.

* Midrash—a Talmudic explanation of the underlying significance of a biblical text.

Someone must pink their pride, decode the handwriting on the wall! Who is to stand up, to withstand? Daniel and his like.

The ancient story tells of conflicts of conscience in opposition to the sordid will of the powers. And a like vocation continues for people of faith; in every age, they (we) must walk a thin line, a line drawn through a world quite as mad as that of Daniel and his all but unpronounceable adversaries. The line separates; it also joins and unites.

As to questions and themes undertaken in our book: shall the world claim us for its own? Or shall we claim one another in God's name, renouncing the world's tactics—murder, hatred, and injustice? The story concerns the wiles of worldly power, striking hard against the discipline of the believing community. In struggle, the faith of Daniel and his friends is revealed ironically as a new form of power. The book is also strangely concerned with dreams. The dreams are opaque to the powerful dreamers; only Daniel has access to their meaning.

To Daniel the dreams lay open matters which the powerful would much prefer to keep under wraps, concealed even from their own soul. The substance of the dreams? The obsession of the mighty with matters of control and domination, over people and property. An obsession that insults and exceeds nature, brings ruin to many, and eventually destroys the intemperate dreamers.

In decoding the dreams, Daniel unmasks the realm of the principalities, those spirits of vengeance, cruelty, lust, and greed. Thus by implication the book reveals the void, the emptiness that lies behind the fearsome brows of the powerful.

The book concerns obedience also: to torah, vows, covenant. The heavy cost of this, and its reward—the blessing that inevitably follows on fidelity. (As well as the opposite:

DANIEL

radical disobedience, pride, thirst for power.)

Judgment is a theme. And the mighty condemn it, even as they undergo its rigors in nightmares of fear and dread. The lowly, on the contrary, hail its onset with joy; come liberation, come vindication!

There are also images of obsession and vain longing. The obsessed, it is shown, lord it over the grandiloquent (finally ridiculous) eminences who welcome such images. Images of royal ego abound; its vapidty and inflation. And in holy contrast, images of truth telling, truthful living.

The book calls us strongly in the direction of tradition; it would make of us a species of scriptural atavists. Every generation must learn from its remote ancestors the truths that evade the nearer ones. (There is a vexing question here for Catholics: where the connection, where the discontinuity between the teaching of current authority, and the noble founders and evangelists and martyrs of our tradition?) We are well advised to hearken with all our hearts' attention to our great-great ancestors like Daniel.

As Daniel demonstrates, there is obedience and obedience. One form tends to servility and shallowness; it hides out in the shadow of him-who-has-the-last-word. Over such conduct no cloud of witnesses hovers, no ancient ancestry, no text (or the text at hand is neglected, closed) no whispers and dreams beckoning. Servile obedience is like a clamorous parental voice at our ear, spelling out details, moral precepts, footnotes, jots and tittles. The law, always the law!

Drowned out is the ancestral hum and murmur, like a shell whispering of seven seas, vast horizons, long vistas of time. Calling us to one another, calling us home.



This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

Taming the Beasts and the King of the Beasts

The Book of Daniel

1 In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods.

³Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. ⁶Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. ⁷The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

⁸But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master. ¹⁰The palace master said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king." ¹¹Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of

the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe.”¹⁴ So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days.¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations.¹⁶ So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

¹⁸At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar,¹⁹ and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king’s court.²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.²¹ And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Taming the Beasts and the King of the Beasts

Daniel 1:1–2 A despondent note opens the book. The worst of times is at hand, and no relief in sight. The holy city has fallen to pagans. More: the tragedy is attributed to the decree of God. A bitter pill indeed. God’s will, the utter downfall of the chosen? An inevitable “yes” is the response of the prophets.

Those unambiguous, robust, fearless voices! Nowhere else, in no other culture, ancient or modern, is so devastating a critique launched on a people by their own. For this time, though, Daniel is far from unique in leveling his stupendous judgment. Jeremiah named the sacking of Jerusalem a judgment against the sins of his people (Jer. 21:1–7; 25:8–14). There is also Ezekiel, chapters 2, 4, and 6. And Lamentations is a long ululation for the deportation of the people of covenant, cowering under God’s decree.

In 586 BCE, Jerusalem fell, its walls and temple ground to a rubble. Judaeans joined their exiled compatriots in Babylon. No temple could be built on foreign soil; no sacrifices could be offered, no pilgrimages undertaken. It is the end of a world; the proud Jerusalemites are reduced to branded slaves, frozen in time and place.

Under such catastrophe, existence itself is shaken. A tormented question arose: where was Jahweh, where the Shekinah,* of what help the Torah and the holy Ark? It was an unparalleled cultural disaster, equaled only by the Holocaust of our lifetime.

* Shekinah—the divine presence of God within the world.

This was a capital point, a poignard aimed at the heart. The God of Israel, some said in despair, had been bested by the god Marduk. Temple artifacts were rifled, transported by heathen hands, deposited blasphemously in the treasury of Nebuchadnezzar's god. Thenceforth, could the God of the Jews be worshipped, in whatever inadequate, sorrowful way, as true God?

Of our protagonist Daniel no ancestry is noted. He simply appears on the scene, a kind of Melchizedek. We know only that he has undergone the exile along with his compatriots. Unlike many, he has survived. Thus do the great appear in our midst—epiphanies, isolates, gifts of God. They surpass whatever promise the bloodline offers; nothing of genetics or circumstance explains their appearance, a near miracle.

We must account Daniel also a survivor, an artful dodger of the slings and arrows of a distempered time. An improviser of ways and means. An icon for the people of his lifetime, and for those to come, an heroic image of fidelity. All of these; and a high mystic as well.

In the Christian tradition he is honored as one of the sublime quaternity of the major prophets. In a window of the Cathedral of Chartres, an astonishing image glows: Daniel and his other “major” compatriots—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—bear upon their shoulders the four evangelists.

Daniel 1:3–7 To begin our story, Daniel and three companions are chosen from among the exiles by the king. A distinction is thus conferred, with many a gratuity to follow! And a danger as well.

The tactic is common enough, and within the imperial ideology it makes sound sense. To wit; single out, segregate

the best of an enslaved population. The irony starts here, and the danger as well. And the sowing of envy and confusion among the exiles.

As to the lucky few, the royal tactic emerges. Stroke their ego; offer compensations and comforts. Bond with them; enlist them in the adventure of empire. Offer relief from the rigors of exile; beckon them to the “good life.” Thus a new, silken enslavement replaces the former brutal one. *Noblesse oblige*. Let the favored ones forget their compatriots in travail. Let the images and memories of suffering fade away. Let their former companions be reduced—to strangers, faceless “others.”

The rewards accruing to the king’s choice are apparent: access to the powerful, together with a carefully meted authority of one’s own, prestige, citizenship in the high culture of empire. Never stated is the price to be exacted.

Daniel had been named, whether by parents consciously prophetic or not, “God is my judge.” A name is thus attached to a life. And in time, it becomes clear that the life moves in consonance with the name. But now, a new name is conferred by the king. It is a first step toward assimilation; change the names of those (ironically) “chosen” anew, this time for Babylonian honors and riches.

Daniel is no longer Daniel. And the new name denotes neither Jahweh nor judgment. His name is now Belteshazzar: “O Bel, protect the king.” Thus fealty is indicated. Let everyone who hears or pronounces the name realize that the (former) Daniel is liberated from former sovereignties; he is in service to a far different world vision.

And despite the overlay of exemptions and so on, let all know that Belteshazzar is now the king’s close chattel. A new

status? Not so new after all. It comes to this; nothing essential to his former life is altered. Like the slaves and exiles, he remains the property of the Babylonian tyrant.

The tactic is devilishly clever. Change the name, alter in superficial respects the fortunes. In the king's intent, the naming implies apostasy, alienation from a saving tradition, amnesia of soul; these and loss of community, of torah and prophets, of the memory of the saving deeds of God. The purpose is pure horror.

Communal memories are dangerous; they are joined to self understanding, even purpose of resistance. To own one's memories is to deny the imperial definition and decree: you are slaves. We are not slaves; we own our past, and affirm it daily, secretly; free. Dangerous. Such images must be weakened, then obliterated; they are the seedbed of hope. They are an outcry from the depths of the communal psyche. God, save your afflicted people!

But Daniel and his companions (so goes the imperial logic), these fortunate few, are already drawn forth; what need then of an outcry?

No greater honor; the "chosen" are to sit at the king's table. But there is a drawback, an obstacle. It is simple and definitive, and the youths know it. They cannot observe torah and still partake of the royal menu.

Daniel 1:8–16 They must therefore choose. We take note of the subtle effort to obscure all such choices. Why, what of simple gratitude? Has not the king himself singled them out? Shall that not suffice, and more? And shall they, so auspiciously chosen, choose now to make of a small matter a great?

We take note, and are edified. That Daniel's community see a choice looming, albeit a choice dangerous and difficult,

is a precious evidence; their freedom is intact. They speak up. It is a simple “no.” They will abstain from the elegant meats of the palace table. On this small pivot all that is to follow, events whether serendipitous or tragic, turn.

And our story is underway. Two results of fidelity to torah are immediately apparent. The first may be ascribed to the natural benefits of abstinence: the youths’ physical condition blooms and flourishes. But this is hardly the point of the story. The benefits, clear and glowing on the bodies of the resisters, are the sign of God’s interior action. They flourish also in spirit. In reward for their difficult act of obedience, Jahweh confers on them a surpassing wisdom. Against it, all the machinations of the empire will batter in vain. The “system” that surrounds them, smiles on them—and would own them—is declared null and void.

Marked as they are for a distinction (of sorts), a temptation is inferred, obscure and menacing: “Come now, all this do I offer you, if you but fall down and adore . . .”

The primal force of their simple “no” is not easy to grasp. It is uttered by a few; they are strangers and aliens in a land of no mercy. In a sense that could only be called grievous, the youths are on their own. Little help is at hand to reinforce their faith; no temple liturgies, no synagogue, no rhythms of season or days to unroll the scripture afresh, and no elders to consult. (Were the sacred books accessible to exiles in a pagan court? We are told nothing.) The three must undergo a kind of forced growth induced by memory, that dangerous gift. This is their help, and it prevails. Conscience is infused mightily with the memory of torah. They know whence they come.

As tyrants beget tyrants, prophets and martyrs beget their like. Whatever their carnal ancestry, whatever their status among believers of the future, it is clear that Daniel and

his friends are infused and animated by the prophets of their people. The inference is clear; their choice is grievously dangerous. Beyond doubt they are torn. Survival is a large issue. So is protection of one another, and the enfolding of a lorn people in the protection and power a few have attained. They stand at the threshold of influence, as they well know. But above all, they would be faithful.

The king's food, for reasons unexplained, is regarded as a defilement. Had the viands been offered to the gods? In any case, these favored ones are urged to become complaisant consumers. All benefits will follow. But they will not partake. Yielding to the king would be received by their people, as they well know, as an act of apostasy.

We pause over that sturdy "no." At this point of the story, it is Daniel's only word, his only offering, to the exiles, to the future. To ourselves. A gesture of grace, a simple monosyllable! On the lips of the resisters it becomes a word of worship; sorry and small to be sure, lonely, accompanied by no *grandezza*, no trumpets, promising no favorable outcome. A risky word on the tongue. His "no" is all Daniel can offer—and there is no altar to offer it on.

We hear that word, that refusal. We hear it repeated, echoed down the centuries, perhaps never more strongly than in our own day. We know, or know of, those who dare utter it. And of some who die for the utterance. A puny monosyllable; no sooner spoken, it seems lost on the air. And yet the word, like "a cloud no larger than a hand covers the sun."

Daniel's "no" shakes the thrones and the enthroned where they sit. (And one thinks of Bonhoeffer's "no," and that of Franz Jägerstätter, of the students of the White Rose, of Nelson Mandela, of Oscar Romero. And, as I set down these

notes, the “no” of my brother Philip, of James and Gregory, of Susan and Stephen and Helen and Carl and Mark and Tom,* of peacemakers far and near, some awaiting trial, others already convicted and imprisoned. And across the world, how many thousands, unknown, swell that sublime chorus!)

And then, of course, a different drummer, a different choice. The pinch of incense, the meat and wine of kings, the perks, the bowing of the knee. The taxes duly handed over, the draft registration, the military induction. The research and deployment and guarding of obscene weaponry, the paycheck . . . The crime of silence, of complicity.

We conjure, too, the setting in which Daniel’s “no” was uttered; the sordid grandeur of the court, the prospering, the busy brokering and bargaining, the inflated egos, the void, the heartless heart of the empire. The atmosphere of secure power, the diplomatic but military give-and-take bruited about, the economic shifts and ploys, the diplomacy, the next move against the next enemy . . . It all comes to this: we, the titans, decide who shall prosper and who go under, who shall live and who die.

Then an interruption, a “no.” The small secret start of something else. Someone, some few, move quietly out of lockstep. And the solid throne is ever so slightly jarred. The hideous dovetailing of violence and worldly prosperity; the cunning, the power arrogated, taken for granted, a metaphysical verity—all this suddenly is placed in question.

* The people mentioned here all participated in what has become known as the 1997 Prince of Peace Plowshares action. Led by Philip Berrigan, the Plowshares group entered the Bath (Maine) Ironworks on Ash Wednesday to protest the production of guided missile destroyers. Subsequently arrested and tried, most of them served prison terms.

