

# 'Iconic Readers' - Daniel 7-12 in a Community of Pentecostal Interpreters

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## Introduction

In the context of wider research I have become aware how little is being published on Pentecostalism at an academic level. This paper is an attempt at addressing this situation. Confronted with a slew of popular books on 'End-Times' theology I found myself confronted with the question: How do these Pentecostal authors read their Bible? Is for example James Barr right to lump Pentecostals with fundamentalists as he does in his treatise on fundamentalism?

Looking deeper into the matter, I have come to the conclusion that Barr is wrong, or at least that he greatly oversimplifies. Developing a concept introduced by literary commentator George Steiner, I demonstrate how Pentecostals are 'iconic readers'. As such, their reading incorporates certain elements that are found in fundamentalist interpretation. However, there are other aspects of Pentecostal reading (for example an openness towards ongoing revelation) that at least on the surface are profoundly alien, if not antithetical to fundamentalism. While iconic reading sets Pentecostals apart from certain reading communities, it creates contacts with others. For example; in spite of considerable ecclesiological tensions, Pentecostal 'End-Times' theology is firmly set within the dispensationalist framework.

## Iconic Readers

In his (1979) paper 'Critic'/'Reader', literary critic George Steiner noted the inward directed nature of 'reading' was intrinsically in opposition to the outward directed nature of critical discourse. In the same context, he saw in certain approaches to theological 'reading' a complete internalisation of the text for which he coined the term 'iconic reading'. In this way, iconic reading is theological reading with certain particular dimensions. Among other things, exegetic meditation on often minimal textual units can be a central feature of such reading.

In the same context, Steiner identified a variety of approaches to iconic reading. "There are the letter-by-letter hermeneutics of the Cabbalists, the word-by-word commentaries of the Talmudists or Patristic readers, [there is] Karl Barth advancing sentence by sentence in Romans" (Steiner 1979:445). Iconic readers assign tremendous importance to even the smallest textual unit. Read iconically sentences,

half sentences, words - and as we shall see even numbers - can acquire tremendous force.

Iconic reading displays its characteristics most prominently where a text is 'difficult'. Unlike critics, iconic readers cannot or will not bend the text to make it fit their world view. If necessary they rather choose to go in the opposite direction and bend their world view to make it fit the text. Iconic readers cannot or will not countenance a retreat behind lines created by statements in the text.

Daniel 10:1 will serve as an example: "In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel." For the iconic reader, the text has set a historical date. This date can and even ought to be verified. Furthermore, the text says that a revelation has been given - knowledge has been disclosed to a man called Daniel by a supernatural agency. Theological illumination and prophetic guidance descend from the text.

In the eyes of the critic, an iconic reader might not even properly understand the text. This has never hindered some of these readers to go to jail or lay down their lives for their readings. Iconic reading, the power which the biblical text is able to exercise by its own literal internal evidence, is a key feature of Pentecostal reading.

Iconic reading creates relationships. In spite of pronounced theological differences, it puts Pentecostals in touch with fundamentalists (even though some fundamentalists have for decades been among their most vociferous critics) and dispensationalists (who have a different if not incompatible ecclesiology, compare Stronstadt 1992, Anderson 1994). Why? Pentecostals recognise affinities to their own iconic reading in these other communities' reading of the Bible.

However, iconic reading not only creates relationships - it also creates distance. Throughout the wider literature there were hardly any references to historical critical views, and, what references there were, were antipathetic throughout. As far fetched as it might appear at first sight: just as the *methodological* poverty of iconic readers easily disqualifies them in the eyes of the historical critic, those critics are in turn rejected as *theologically* unqualified by iconic readers. The reason is plain: iconic readers' sensibilities are jarred by what they perceive to be the critics' unacceptable relationship to the text. They are not reading iconically.

## The Practice of Iconic Reading

With these few theoretical parameters outlined, I will now turn to discuss its practice.

Chapter seven of Yonggi Cho's 1990 *Commentary on Daniel* will serve as a starting point. We are immediately confronted with a complicated interplay of various key features of iconic reading. The chapter begins with an historical excursion on the identity of the four beasts in Daniel. These are unhesitatingly identified along accepted fundamentalist lines. "The first beast which came up from the sea, a lion with eagle's wings, referred to Babylon." (Cho 1990:92). "The second beast in the

vision, a bear ... represented the kingdom of the Medes and Persians" (p. 93). "The leopard with four wings and four heads ... referred to Alexander the Great" (p. 94). "The fourth beast Daniel saw was terrifying and powerful. It had large iron teeth and ten horns. This beast referred to the Roman empire."

In this way, pages 91-97 of Cho's book satisfy themselves with more or less straightforward exegesis in a way with which probably most historical critics could live (give or take the association of the last 'Beast' with the Roman empire).

This exegetic approach is firmly adhered to until almost the end of the chapter.

However, in the second paragraph on page 98, Cho abruptly and without explanation again breaks out of this mould. The idea of the rapture is introduced, even though it is clearly nowhere in the text. A further Pentecostal proprium appears when Cho presumes that only those who are filled with the Holy Spirit will be raptured. Finally, the typically dispensationalist application of the text to the near future is made. Eschatological significance is assigned to the year 1992 - which was still some years in the future when the book was originally published:

As we have also noted before in chapter 2, around the time when the unification of ten countries is completed in Europe, we Christians will be taken up into heaven all at once. That is why we should pray all the more to receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit as the time draws near. We do not know when the unification will be completed. Some think the European Community that will be established in 1992 will be the fulfilment of these prophecies. Others believe it is only the beginning of the process that will lead to full political unification.

The example shows how freely iconic readers mix different strands of scriptural interpretation with pastoral aims, the influence of their dispensationalist reading guild as well as the theological propria of their movement. Perusing the selected 'End-Times' literature that was the object of my research, I was continually confronted with similar literary, motivational, theological and methodological tangles. In the following, the emphasis will be on laying open one of these tangles.

## Icon and Text

How is the analogy of the icon associated with the text? In the Eastern Orthodox context, the icon is venerated not because the image itself is thought to be of much consequence. Its artistic or historic value, considerable as it may be, is of secondary consideration to the worshipper. The interest in the icon is rooted in the belief that it has been brought into contact with the divine through the act of consecration and by implication that the icon has become charged with something of the divine presence. It has been transformed into something like the this-dimensional (material/temporal) representation for something that has its ultimate reality in the trans-dimensional (spiritual) realm.

The parallels to iconic reading are obvious. Iconic readers have little or no

interest in the human origin and context of the text as such. The historical context is as peripheral to their interest as the craftsman who painted the icon is to the interest of the Eastern Orthodox worshipper before an icon.

Otis' (1991: 34) first reference to Daniel provides a good example of how iconic reading operates at the most basic level:

Anyone can observe and report on these turbulent, unpredictable times. But deciphering the implications of these developments in order to make wise decisions about our lives and our world is quite another matter. For this we need divine help. To find this help, we turn to the Word of God, and in particular to the prophet Daniel whose ancient writings have recently leapt onto our twentieth-century stage.

Daniel is assumed as a historic person, but as such is not of that much interest to Otis. Neither here nor anywhere else in Otis' book is there any great interest in Daniel's historical situation, or in the original context of the Book of Daniel. Instead, the text is presented as the Word of God that can offer 'divine help' in the form of inspired insight.

Otis subsequently cites and exegetes a passage from Daniel (2:21-22) relevant to his theme. The exegesis takes place at a very literal level, with no material or illustrations added at this stage.

*He changes the times and the seasons. He removes kings and raises up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise. And knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and secret things.*

In keeping with the divine pattern of bestowing added blessings and responsibilities upon those who have demonstrated good stewardship, Daniel proclaims here that knowledge - and we may assume that this knowledge pertains to revelation about tomorrow - will be granted to those who have already cultivated understanding. An intriguing declaration, and one that raises a salient question: If understanding is the prerequisite to revelation, what exactly is it that we must understand? Otis (1991:34)

Otis' answers his own question by means of three statements that sum up how he wants this passage of Daniel to be read:

There would appear to be three crucial elements to this process of understanding:

- 1) The times we are living in,
- 2) the spiritual battlefield we are fighting on and
- 3) God's ways in evangelism and spiritual warfare.

(Otis 1991:34)

Otis then proceeds to deal with each of these points separately, under the section headings "Understanding the Times We Are Living in", "Understanding the

Spiritual Battlefield We Are Fighting On” and “Understanding God’s Ways”. Plainly, Otis’ use of Daniel is fundamentalist. The biblical text with which he deals is of a divine order and is treated differently from the other literature that is quoted. Equally, the literary structure is developed in a way that grounds individual passages as well as this whole chapter of the book in a literal reading of the divinely inspired text. As iconic readers, Pentecostal readers do share important aspects of fundamentalist reading.

## Icon and Spirit

However, Pentecostal reading has added dimensions which are absent from fundamentalist reading. Again the idea of iconicity will help to illustrate what is meant. An individual Eastern Orthodox believer has a mystic experience in connection with an icon. Through the icon, the believer feels put in touch with the spiritual realm that for him/her establishes the icon’s true worth.

Similar processes are close to the heart of the Pentecostal experience. As we have seen Pentecostals regard the text as divinely inspired just like fundamentalists. Even so, the spiritual reality that ‘guarantees’ the icon continues to be the real concern to the Pentecostal reader, because it is out of this realm that flow the ongoing manifestations of the Holy Spirit. In the context of ‘End-Times’ theology, the main interest in this context lies in prophecy: predictive insight into the future.

Cho (1990:7) gives a good illustration of his own textual perception in the preface of his book, when he says:

Modern critics who disbelieve that genuine prophecy can take place have asserted that all the fulfilled predictions (of Daniel) had to have been composed after the events they describe, no earlier than the Maccabean period (second century BC). But *through the guidance of the Holy Spirit we are assured* that such assumptions about the impossibility of prophecy are wrong (emphasis added).

Extremely few, if any, genuine Fundamentalists would even consider arguing a point in such a way. According to their views one would have to reach much further back and argue in a much more round about way to find the Holy Spirit at work. With Pentecostal authors, however, the idea of direct Holy Spirit influence on their scriptural interpretation shows up again and again.

Chapter six of Otis’ book (titled “The Reemergence of the Prince of Persia”) serves as an example of an iconic reader for whom the Spirit has not fallen silent. Following up on a quote of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, proclaiming the rule of God in Iran Otis makes the following remarkable statement:

It is a curious and tragic irony that the very regime that bestowed upon its enemies the epithet of the ‘Great Satan’ should itself be controlled by him. Today, spiritual Persia stands beside Babylon as one of the foremost obstacles

in the path of advancing ambassadors of Christ.

There is mounting evidence to suggest that the powerful demonic prince of Persia has recently been loosed from his cosmic struggle with the archangel Michael and is once again prowling the neighbourhoods of the Middle East.

Even though he works out his themes almost exclusively along current affairs and geo-political lines, Otis' underlying theme is theological throughout. Life is a spiritual battle, and the world a spiritual battlefield. From the Fall onwards, Satan and his lieutenants (the Prince of Persia is only one) have been battling man for the dominion of the planet. The various dark 'Powers and Principalities of the Air' may have their strongholds (Babylon is only one of them), and they continue to keep their subject peoples in bondage and religious deception. It is the mandate of the messengers of Christ to demolish strongholds and proclaim liberty to these captives (Otis 1991:96).

A strong vein of Pentecostal triumphalism allows Otis to discount present day church apathy as a contemporary and passing phenomenon that is restricted to the Western world. To Otis, the 20th Century is not only one of unprecedented battles. It is also a time of unprecedented victories for his cause. With reference to the vast numerical growth of Pentecostalism world wide, Otis (1991:246) rounds off his theme by identifying the contemporary move of the Spirit within the church as one of raising up spiritual soldiers to roll back the forces of hell for a season of unprecedented harvest. Confucianism (in China) and Communism (in Eastern Europe) are the spiritual 'giants' that have already been defeated in this century. Islam and Hinduism are next and may indeed be, as the book title indicates, "The Last of the Giants."

Otis' well written and competently referenced book shows the methodological freedom and theological creativity with which some Pentecostals approach their interpretation. Iconic reading is tempered with considerable theological creativity. The circle of apocalypticism is squared with triumphalism - no mean feat: the future is known. The seed of the woman will crush the serpents head.

## **The Icon in its Frame**

There is another aspect to iconic reading that needs to be understood. The icon has a frame - the painting of the face of Christos Pantocrator is smothered in gold and studded with gems. Not all icon worshippers make sufficient distinction between the idea represented by the icon, the spiritual reality that stands behind it, and the baubles that surround it. This confusion of icon and frame also has its analogy in iconic reading. In quite a few of the books I looked at it was obvious that it was not so much the biblical text as such that stood at the centre of attention. Instead, especially in some of the poorer literature, the dispensationalist framework that has come to surround the text is treated as if it were an integral part of it.

A good example of this approach is Pentecostal author George T Curle. For

Curle, the whole of world history serves as an illustration of how dependably predictive biblical prophecy has worked itself out in reality through the millennia. Curle's reading takes place within the standard dispensationalist framework, which sees in the Bible evidence for a series of dispensations under which God has managed the world.

These dispensations are successive stages in God's revelation of his purposes.... Dispensationalists put great stress on the distinction between Israel and the church. Unfulfilled prophecies regarding Israel will be fulfilled within the nation itself, not within the church, which is virtually a parenthesis within God's overall plan of dealing with Israel. (Erickson 1985:1163)

Curle's theme is to show how the fate of Israel is intertwined with that of the 'Gentile' nations. In as far as he deals with Israel, he does so on solidly literalist Old Testament grounds. With regard to the Gentiles, he cannot do this without putting strain on the dispensationalist scheme. To this purpose he develops a separate but parallel chronology of considerable ingenuity and subsequently devotes two appendices to showing how these chronologies fit with the standard dispensationalist interpretation of Daniel (p. 197f). The iconic reader's fear of straying too far from his textual icon and its dispensationalist frame is almost palpable. However remote his discoveries in the realm of world history may seem from an Old Testament point of view, Curle refuses to be seen as operating independently from the text.

Dispensationalists' effortless weaving forward and backward between past, present and future is often difficult to comprehend for readers who are outsiders to their guild. One could easily get the impression that they take liberties with the text. However, Weber noted (1990:96) that

Dispensationalist Bible teachers are able to convince millions of people that they handle the Scriptures respectfully and well. At a time when most 'mainline' scholars or preachers all but ignore prophetic and apocalyptic biblical texts or downplay any modern application of their message, dispensationalists pay close attention.

However, as a Pentecostal, Curle needs to have more to offer than just a re-working of old dispensationalist schemes, and he has. In the face of numerous and well-documented previous failures to calculate 'the end' correctly, Curle is unafraid to cast a new date. A number of highly involved calculations enable him to identify not the time of the end as such, but at least the beginning of the 'Great Tribulation' (for the year 1999). The "terminal year 2005 AD" (Curle 1988:24) follows more or less logically from there, following the standard dispensationalist line of a seven year tribulation period.

Curle is aware that previous calculations about the end times have gone astray, but like a historical critic who sees a late dating of a gospel rendered obsolete by a new piece of archaeological evidence, Curle is too securely grounded in his method

to question the overall validity of his own approach just because previous theorists have made a mistake somewhere. If previous calculations were wrong, better calculations can and need to be made. To this purpose, Curle wields his personal methodology called 'chronoprophecy' in order to take chronological 'bearings' from Scripture. Curle is very upfront and Pentecostal about where his inspirations come from: "The Lord in His marvellous grace has revealed to me many bearings from the Bible and history that cross, converge, connect and coincide with 2005AD!" (Curle 1988:15). "When the Lord revealed this bearing to me in December 1985..." (p. 45) Other instances could be cited.

The following three time lines are the result of Curle's revelations, in increasing order of complexity and originality.

#### **a. The Times of the Millenniums**

"From Adam to Abraham a time span of 2000 years. From Abraham to Christ a time span of 2000 years. We are now at the tail end of a further 2000 years, just before the thousand years of rest commence." (Curle 1988:30)

#### **b. The Times of the Gentiles**

On the basis of Ezekiel 4 the full period of punishment for Israel was to be 430 years, commencing from the siege of Jerusalem 586 BC. From these 430 years the seventy years of punishment in Babylon are deducted, leaving a period of 360 years of further punishment (compare Curle p. 38). The end of the Babylonian captivity is assigned to the year 516 BC, which becomes the starting point for Curle's new calculation:

The missing factor is found in Leviticus 26 where we find the identical context to Ezekiel's prophecy, ie. dispersal among the nations.... *I will multiply your afflictions SEVEN TIMES OVER* (Leviticus 26:21)

$360 \times 7 = 2520$  years. Adding 2520 to 516 BC brings us ... to the year 2005 AD! (Curle p. 40, emphasis his).

#### **c. The Times of the Temples**

This third set of calculations concentrates on the Jerusalem temple ground, "the most sensitive piece of real estate in the world; any wrong move there could trigger a world war" (Curle, p. 57). Because this area is the "spiritual epicentre of the world"(p. 58), anything that goes on there cannot help but affect the world. In this set of calculations it is not Israel, but the Gentile nations that stand at the center of interest: Babylonians, Romans, Muslims, Knight Templars, the British. From this perspective, Curle manages to reduce the turbulent goings on of world history to the following serene symmetry.

Completion of the year 691 AD. is the apex of this symmetry, because it is exactly halfway between the year 624 BC. (rise of Old Testament Babylon) and 2005 (projected fall of spiritual Babylon). It just so happens that in the year 691 AD. the Dome of the Rock was completed. Having established this crucial date, Curle draws two time lines from there: one back into the past, one forward to the present and into

the future beyond.

Six hundred twenty one years backward brings Curle to the destruction of Herod's temple in 70 AD. Five hundred eighty five years prior to that, the Second Temple was completed in 516 BC. Seventy years prior, the First Temple was destroyed in 586 BC. Thirty years prior to that, the Babylonian Empire appeared in 624 BC.

Now it gets really interesting: Six hundred twenty one years forward from 691 AD lead Curle to the abolition of the order of the Knight Templars (who for a time had their headquarters in the Dome of the Rock) in 1312. Five hundred eighty five years forward from there: first Zionist Congress in Basle in 1897, where the foundations for the modern State of Israel were laid. Another seventy years forward bring Curle to the year 1967, when the temple area recaptured by Israeli forces. Thirty eight years forward leads Curle to project the fall of Babylon for the year 2005.

## Conclusion

This is a preliminary study looking at the interpretative strategies employed by Pentecostal authors. I hope to show that a reader oriented approach leads to a better understanding of this significant yet neglected reading community than the standard approaches employed by historical critics and liberal theologians.

On this basis, three strands are clearly recognisable in Pentecostal interpretation, two of which they share with other reading communities, while one is exclusively Pentecostal. These three strands of interpretation are:

First, like fundamentalists, Pentecostals have a very 'high' view of Scripture. Full divine origin and full correspondence with divine actuality for every detail of all of Scripture is assumed. Otis is able to construct a whole new world view on the basis of a few verses in Daniel. Curle can calculate the 'time of the end' on the basis of a few verses in Ezekiel and Leviticus.

Second, their reading marks Pentecostals as different from fundamentalists because they allow aspects of ongoing revelation to directly impact their reading (both with Cho and Curle) in ways which are not in this way found among fundamentalists.

Third, like other reading communities, Pentecostals operate within an interpretative framework of their choice when dealing with Scripture. With regard to 'End-Times' theology it is the framework of dispensationalism. It is difficult to make sense of Curle's calculations as well as Cho's expectation of the rapture unless this is taken into account.

## Notes:

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