

Genesis 1:26-28

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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A HORRIFIC COVENANT

(Daniel Four)

by Ray R. Sutton

Horror often deals with the theme of **transformation**. I was recently reminded of this as I unfortunately was asked to review a psycho-horror movie, *Silence of the Lambs*. I don't recommend it because of several gruesome scenes. Nevertheless, the show brings out an aspect of horror that is more subtle in other books and movies, affording me an opportunity to emphasize this theme.

Silence of the Lambs is about a serial killer who is obsessed with perverted change. He is Buffalo Billy, a man who wants to be a transvestite even though he is not physically able to undergo a sex-change operation. To accomplish his desire to be another gender, he murders his female victims for their skin. He skins them and begins to sew their flesh into a human female suit that he can wear. This way, he can become something that he is not, a female.

As an added perverted touch to his bizarre passion, he stuffs a large mid-eastern cocoon down the throat of his victims. He intends for the insect to transform within the deceased to become a butterfly. Why a butterfly? It is a symbol of transformation. It even represented the Resurrection in the ancient Church. In *Silence of the Lambs*, however, it graphically represents a perverted man's desire to change.

Perhaps Buffalo Billy was hoping the girl would become something different in the next life. Perhaps he was leaving a serial killer calling card, which becomes his own self-imposed hint toward his own capture; most of serial killers want to **be caught** at some point. Perhaps he selected the butterfly to express what he wanted, a change into another person. His motivation could have been all of these combined or maybe there is another explanation. Whatever the point of the butterfly symbol in *Silence of the Lambs*, the craving for human transformation surfaces. It is a false transformation.

Scriptural Transformation

The Bible talks about the desire for transformation on the part of humans. We should not be surprised. The Bible addresses all human desires, transformation being one of the main ones. But not all transformation is bad. Some is good. Some people want to change for the better. Others want to be something entirely different in a commendable sense, as in the case of the criminal who wants to go straight.

Scripture even talks about the need for human beings to be changed. It says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). God wants man to change. He wants His creation to be transformed from

a fallen condition into a spiritual person. I use the word spiritual because it implies godly, just as the Bible speaks this way even in the verse just before the one quoted above: "Your spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1). I am not using the word to mean other worldly or non-human. Being spiritual in the Scripture means being human, as expressed in the Apostle Paul's command, "Act like man" (1 Corinthians 16:13).

The implication of being told to act like a man is that man naturally acts like something else. He may attempt to be a god but the irony of all this is that he behaves like animals when he tries to be a god. This is a prominent Scripture theme that goes all the way back to the beginning. Adam and Eve listened to a serpent, an animal, who told them that they could be as gods. They followed an animal instead of the living God. As a result, they needed atonement through the death of animals. They even had to wear the animal skins, reminding them among other things of their tendency to depend on animals instead of God. Through their sin of complicity with an animal, they set the sinful tone of man's rebellion. They attempted false transformation with the result that they became more like the animal kingdom, the basis of all horror.

The Theology of Horror

The basic theology of horror is that man becomes something horrifying when he tries to become God or change his being. Go to the average video store and you'll discover a huge number of horror movies all dealing with a variation of this theme. This society is preoccupied with horror because it is obsessed with change. In one sense it should want to change, but it wants the wrong kind of change in the wrong way.

King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 explains this phenomenon. He was a proud man who exalted himself above God. He fell the same way that Satan, Adam, and Eve had fallen. He wanted to ascend above God. He desired to be a god. When he did, he became a monster, a kind of werewolf. For this reason he is a model of horror. Using what happened to him, I can briefly summarize the horror genre. It consistently deals with three themes.

First, horror refers to empowerment through violent means, blood drinking and vampirism, or some other form of manipulation. When humanity attempts to become something that it is not, it becomes obsessed with power. Why? Man can only transform himself the way God commands, which is to allow God to do it. Or, humanity can attempt change outside of dependence on the Lord, which always results in forceful means. Man has to force his way, involving shedding of blood. He cannot change himself by force apart from the taking of another life. If he commits himself

to the devil (the occult), he will eventually have to kill or be involved in a ritual killing. If he is like the character in *Silence of the Lambs*, Buffalo Billy, he will end up murdering innocent human beings. All of this is nothing less than an attempt to transcend a person's being to become something that he is not.

Second, horror deals with the theme of the wrong *kind of change*, such as the case of a werewolf. Frankenstein is another example, although most Americans have not read the original story where Frankenstein was a *perfect Englishman* who became a monster. The message was that perfection produces a monstrosity. When man tries to become something other than man, he becomes an animal.

Third, the final theme of horror concerns *escape*, another form of false transformation. This is often a major emphasis in Science Fiction. Man tries to find help from or hope in another universe out there. He no longer believes that our world has the power to sustain or change life. He believes another world offers this. Another world does, the kingdom of God. But when man tries to find the answers in the wrong, other world, he creates a horrific world. He brings the wrong kind of change in an attempt to escape.

Thus, horror is deeply rooted in man's desire to become God. Nebuchadnezzar is an actual example in Scripture. He became a horrific animal as a result of his sin and rebellion. He was disciplined by God, however, and changed back into humanity. He beautifully illustrates the power of God to bring correct and true change.

Yet, Nebuchadnezzar adds a significant development to the redemptive history of Scripture. He was a gentile king who had been set apart for God's purposes, fallen from faithfulness, and been restored. The fact that this horror-story turned into a fairy-tale and that it happened to a Gentile is extremely important to the development of Scripture.

Gentiles and Daniel

Scripture is complex even though the message is simple-yet-profound. It reveals a single consistent redemptive message from beginning to end. But it weaves other purposes together with the one major theme. It unfolds layers of themes. It has a manyness to it, reflecting the Oneness and Manyness of God.

The Book of Daniel is no different. It consistently tells stories about the redemption of the Gentiles to the end that Israel is allowed to return to the Promised Land. As this message has been developed time and again, however, it has followed a *fivefold* covenantal cycle in each chapter: court, conflict, wisdom, test, transfer of power. In all of the chapters thus far, it has consistently begun in the court of the pagan and when the conflict is over, it has revealed a complete transfer from the unbeliever to the man of God.

Cycle of Discipline

Daniel four offers part of another important cycle in Scripture: the process of discipline. Jesus teaches it to His disciples (Matthew 18:15ff.). It has *five* steps. First, some unrepentant offense is observed by a member of the covenant community; it is possible to see an offense but also discover that the offender immediately repents. Second, if there is no repentance, the offender is approached privately by the person who saw the original offense. Third, if the offender is not repentant, the original observer takes third parties to witness his attempt to restore the offending brother (sister). Fourth, if the offending party is still *unrepentant*, the matter is presented to the broader covenant community to *adjudicate*. Fifth, if the offending party is found *guilty* and *still does* not repent then he is excommunicated. The entire

process, therefore, is for the purpose of restoring someone to the covenant.

The first five chapters of Daniel parallel the cycle of discipline. First, Nebuchadnezzar commits an offense by taking captive the people of God and stealing the vessels from the Temple (Daniel 1:2). This great sacrilege of taking what exclusively belongs to God is condemned by the Torah (Leviticus 5). He is given an opportunity to repent when Daniel and his friends perform better than the Chaldean young people; they are a reminder that the Lord is with *them*.

Second, Daniel functions as a witness to Nebuchadnezzar. He interprets a dream about the great king's fall. Nebuchadnezzar apparently turns from paganism, but the next chapter shows him committing idolatry all over again.

Third, Daniel's friends, serving as a double witness, literally stand before the king's idol and will not worship it. They call Nebuchadnezzar to repentance by the their faithful witness. And again, Nebuchadnezzar temporarily repents.

Fourth, Daniel four takes the matter of Nebuchadnezzar to the next level, the *court of God*. In this chapter, the king receives another dream. He reaches a point of great arrogance, taking all the credit once again for his greatness. He is not ruling alone, however. And, he has reached the next level of discipline. He is prosecuted by the *Watcher*, a person we will examine in the text, but for now it is worth noting that the king is found guilty by the court. He is cast down but he is not put out. He comes to repentance but his successors begin to commit the same offenses against God.

Fifth, the kingdom of Babylon is excommunicated in finality. In a curious turn of events, however, even though the Kingdom of Babylon is conquered, it is raised up again through its conquerors, the Medo-Persian Empire.

Thus, the chapters of Daniel follow the cycle of discipline. This should help the reader to fit these events into their larger context. What does all of this mean?

Gentile in the Covenant

I think Nebuchadnezzar was dealt with as a covenant member beginning in the first chapter of the book. How could he be considered such a member when he did not truly convert until later, the end of the fourth chapter? Remember, Nebuchadnezzar had taken the "holy vessels" from the temple. He was eating on them, analogous to *taking communion* in the New Testament. Yet, because he was not *circumcised* and a true member of God's covenant, he ate from God's vessels "unworthily," to use New Covenant language. He was participating in a sacramental meal and sealing the covenant with the sacrament of eating. So, he had to be dealt with as a covenant member even though he was eating damnation to himself as a false covenant member.

This problem, by the way, repeats itself with *Belshazzar*, one of Nebuchadnezzar's descendants; he is defeated the very night he eats from the holy vessels because he eats unworthily before the Lord. The result is total excommunication.

I believe that the issue of Gentile participation in the Old Covenant presents a dilemma during the Old Covenant period of Biblical history, one not resolved until the New Covenant. Strictly speaking according to the *Abrahamic Covenant*, Gentiles could not enter the covenant *apart* from becoming a Jew by the rite of circumcision. The rite made a Gentile a Jew, making it neatly impossible for a Gentile to come into the covenant without giving up his ethnic identity. This problem was not completely resolved until the New Covenant, when the sign of *covenantal* entrance is changed to baptism, allowing *all* races and na-

tonalities to enter the covenant without forcing them to give up nationality.

Prior to the New Covenant, however, Joseph provides a model for how the Gentile could become part of the covenant without giving up nationality. As a son of Jacob, he was cast out by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt.

While there, he is raised up by God to be the redemptive deliverer for Israel. Eventually, he becomes second in command to Pharaoh. In the process, he is adopted into the household of Pharaoh when Pharaoh gives him a new name and a ring to wear (Genesis 41 :42-45), both symbols of adoption. Joseph even marries a Gentile daughter of the priest of On (Genesis 41 :45).

Joseph is then described as, "Over the land of Egypt" (Genesis 41 :45), making him a covenantal head and also making it possible for Israel to come and dwell in a foreign land and not lose their covenantal inheritance of the Land of Israel. How so? Joseph in effect became a Gentile. He forfeited his inheritance in the land because his portion went to his sons and not to him. On the other hand, he did not lose the covenant promises because his sons did receive the covenant on the basis of him. But by becoming a Gentile in some sense, he could become a covenantal leader of Jew and Gentile. He could rule Egypt and provide safe abode for Israel. Because he did become a covenantal head over Egypt, God later dealt with the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus as one who was a steward of His people. He spoke to Pharaoh as a covenant breaker and sent the curses of the covenant on the Egyptian king because Egypt had been included in some remote sense into the covenant by means of Joseph's dual citizenship.

Joseph had created a dual citizenship to draw the Gentile into a covenant relationship. He effectively made Egypt a vassal of Israel but he had to forfeit his own personal inheritance in the process.

During the time of Daniel, a similar procedure occurs. This time, God raises up a Gentile universal emperor, Cyrus. He describes him, "Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings" (Isaiah 45:1). Notice that God calls Cyrus, "the anointed," literally, the Messiah. How could this be? God put Cyrus in place of the Davidic king of Israel, for the nation had not had one since its exile. No king sat on Israel's throne, meaning the Babylonian kings took the Davidic king's place. Cyrus was the one who financed the rebuilding of the temple. He was the one who provided what was needed to restore the covenantal society of Israel. He was the Davidic deliverer even though he was not of the lineage of David. But Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king, was God's messiah.

The use of a Gentile king as a redemptive deliverer has important covenantal implications. First, Gentile kings over Israel were of necessity brought into some kind of covenant relationship with God. They, like Joseph, were in covenant with God's people. They were the suzerain, having made Israel their vassal. Yet, they were not the true Suzerain and true Lord. They were therefore in some sort of middle position between God and His people. As such they were accountable to God, as in Nebuchadnezzar's case. If they misrepresented God or abused the Lord's people, they were held responsible. They were disciplined like Nebuchadnezzar or even directly deposed by God like Belshazzar. They were treated covenantally because they were covenantal heads.

Second, a covenantal Gentile king explains why Gentiles were included in the inheritance of Israel after the exile. Ezekiel says the following,

"So you shall divide this land among yourselves ac-

cording to the tribes of Israel. And it will come about that you shall divide it by lot for an inheritance among yourselves and among the aliens who stay in your midst, who bring forth sons in your midst. And they shall be to you as the native-born among the sons of Israel; they shall be allotted an inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel. And it will come about that in the tribe with which the alien stays, there you shall give him his inheritance," declares the Lord God (Ezekiel 47:21-23).

After Israel returned from exile, the land was reapportioned. It was divided as an inheritance in such a way that Gentiles could be part of the inheritance. As far as I know, this had never been allowed before. Always the Gentile had to be circumcised and become a Jew to inherit. After the exile, the Gentile is allowed to have his own inheritance because he lives near one of the tribes.

The only explanation that makes any sense to me is that the unique covenantal position of the Gentile king effected the inheritance of Israel. Just as Joseph's having dual citizenship affected his inheritance but did not destroy covenantal privileges for his children, so Cyrus' covenantal relationship to Israel enabled Gentiles to be part of the covenant without circumcision.

Of course there would be problems associated with this approach. Without the sign of the covenant, the Gentiles would eventually have conflict with Jews. The Gentiles were part of the covenant but not of it. Only through the New Covenant could the Gentile relationship to the covenant completely be resolved. Nevertheless, Gentile kings such as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus played an important role in advancing the Gentile relationship to the Abrahamic Covenant.

In Daniel four, we learn about God's covenantal relationship with Nebuchadnezzar. The covenant pattern reappears, proving that the Gentile king had entered covenant and was held accountable. Let us examine the covenant framework once again.

The Court (4:1-3)

Nebuchadnezzar shares a word of testimony. He is actually committing to writing what God did in his life. He says, "I thought it good to declare 'the signs and wonders that the Most High God has worked for me'" (Daniel 4:2). This statement parallels the opening comments in Deuteronomy 1:3. Moses declares the transcendence of the Lord by pronouncing the primacy of the Word of God.

On the basis of this, I think believers should write down their testimony for future generations. Even if a person did not have a dramatic conversion, or if he doesn't know exactly when he became a believer, or even if he can't remember when he wasn't a Christian because he grew up in a Christian home, he should still record for posterity how the Lord has worked in his life. Imagine what it would be like if instead of simply tracing genealogies, Christians could construct a testimonial tree!

Nebuchadnezzar emphasizes signs and wonders in his witness. What were they? They were miraculous events such as dreams (and their interpretation) as well as salvation from the fiery furnace. What did they teach? They taught salvation and judgment. First, they showed Nebuchadnezzar salvation through the Word verbal and visible. On the verbal side, the dream of the giant man revealed salvation outside of Nebuchadnezzar's own world because it had to be interpreted by God's people, and ultimately this was the work of the Seed who would bring salvation. The message of the dream communicated salvation through the Stone and its kingdom. Then, pertaining to the more visible display of salvation, the signs were actually seen. And, the men in the fiery furnace were delivered by the "Angel of the Lord."

Second, the signs and wonders conveyed *judgment*. Verbally, the dream communicated the destruction of the kingdoms of this world. Visually, the dream and the fiery furnace taught the final judgment of God on anyone not being identified with the Lord of heaven and earth. Thus, signs and wonders consistently served this twofold purpose of salvation and judgment: Egyptian plagues, the Book of Acts, and A.D. 70.

The Conflict (4:4-18)

Nebuchadnezzar enters another conflict around a new dream. A second time his rest is interrupted, proving the old saying, "No rest for the wicked." The Word of God is making him troubled.

The king surprisingly appeals to the Chaldean magicians *first* (4:7). As before, he calls for Daniel *last* (4:8). This is a conflict of hierarchies, point two of the Biblical covenant (Deuteronomy 1:5-4). Nebuchadnezzar calls him by his Gentile name (4:9), indicating that the king has not become a true member of the covenant, nor does he really want to acknowledge Daniel first. Nebuchadnezzar is a man who only wants the Lord if he absolutely needs him: The Lord is not his first choice even though he is willing to endorse God. But he is not willing to do anymore than "run advertisements" for God. He does not want to depend on Yahweh and he certainly does not want someone outside of his kingdom serving as his personal chaplain. But once again, he is forced to depend on Daniel and his God.

Also, the king tells Daniel the dream, whereas he didn't before. He was convinced that Daniel was indwelt by the Holy Spirit (4:18), raising an important point. The Old Testament believer was indwelt with the Spirit. Thus, the difference between Old and New in this matter is that the Spirit came to the Gentiles in the New Covenant.

Wisdom (4:19-27)

Daniel is given the interpretation. He provides the **Word** from God that becomes a statement of the ethical **stipulations** of the terms of God's covenant relationship, point three of the Biblical covenant (Deuteronomy 5-26). Nevertheless, Daniel wants the king to know that he does not seek harm for him. He tells Nebuchadnezzar that he wants the dream to be fulfilled on his enemies. In this sense, he displays compassion for Nebuchadnezzar even though he is a bearer of bad news.

Daniel interprets the dream. He describes Nebuchadnezzar as a great tree, a common metaphor for human beings or kingdoms (Psalm 1; Luke 17). He tells of a time of great abundance until a "watcher" calls for the tree to be cut down (4:23). From the description, he has to be referring to an angelic being for it is set in contrast to the living (4:17). Angels prosecute in the Old Covenant (Job 1), which changes in the New Covenant. Men are given the power to prosecute and fight against angels (Ephesians 6:10ff.). This is a fundamental shift from Old to New Testament. Angels were given to guard the gate to the garden in the Old Testament. Men are given this role in the New Testament.

Daniel continues to describe Nebuchadnezzar's being cut down. The king is made into a slave, indicated by the "iron band." He becomes a vegetarian werewolf for probably a seven year period. In the Old Testament (4:25), debts were canceled after seven years. **Whatever** Nebuchadnezzar had done was canceled and he was returned to his original status. But this is only after he has demonstrated repentance. He must confess the Living God (4:25-26) and he must show mercy (4:27). *Is this works salvation?* No, it is salvation that includes repentance. The principle is that people filled with the grace of God show mercy to those who have not. "Mercy begets mercy" as one of the early Church Fathers once said. This is the message of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

The Test (4:28-33)

The test applies to Nebuchadnezzar in this segment, not Daniel, which is a major difference between all that precedes and all that follows. The test concerns Nebuchadnezzar's pride. He falls when he essentially takes credit for all that he has. He is sanctioned, point four of the Biblical covenant (Deuteronomy 27-30).

Nebuchadnezzar boasts as if it has been his own strength and brilliance that has put him where he is (4:30). When he makes this comment, he of course challenges God, just as those who built the Tower of Babel. He must be put down by God as a demonstration to him and all who follow that the credit is due to God not man.

Dew on his hair is mentioned several times in the passage (4:15,25,32). This water would of course make him less mobile, especially if he were some kind of bird. It would therefore serve as a judgment, just as water consistently does in Scripture. The specific judgment was mental derangement, one of the Deuteronic curses mentioned as a sanction of God's covenant (Deuteronomy 28:28). Thus, the covenant pattern continues.

The Transfer (4:34-37)

This transfer is different from the others in the book. Before and after Nebuchadnezzar's ordeal, Daniel and his friends receive what formerly belonged to the wicked. They are given what had never belonged to them. In this instance, Nebuchadnezzar receives what formerly belonged to him. He is restored to full humanity. He is returned his inheritance in the kingdom. He is not disinherited. This is part of the succession theme of the Biblical covenant, point five (Deuteronomy 31-34).

Thus, the life of Nebuchadnezzar comes to an end with perhaps the first reference to the salvation of a Gentile king. He is even used to pen Holy Scripture, provided in Daniel 4. He is a **proleptic** fulfillment of a New Covenant promise that the kings of the world would some day convert and come to God's throne (Psalm 2). He is an early reminder that one day Gentile kings of the world would be in and under the Biblical covenant, applying the laws of Moses through Christ, the ultimate king to come!