

Time and the Times in the Book of Daniel

A sermon preached at Jesus College, Oxford
on 5th May 2013

by DR JOHN JARICK

[Scripture readings: Daniel 12:1-13; Mark 13:28-37]

*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

A few years ago, in a series of art galleries around the world, there was a touring exhibition of the work of the Japanese artist On Kawara. The exhibition included two sets of books, entitled *One Million Years (Past)* and *One Million Years (Future)*. I saw the display early in its tour, when it was at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, and I was struck, so to speak, by those particular volumes. Let me try to describe them to you.

Imagine, if you will, the set of digits that make up the figure 2001, and that accordingly symbolize one year, the first of our present millennium. Now imagine that figure followed by 2002, and then 2003, and then 2004, and so on. Let's have these figures arranged in sequence across a large page, large enough for us to have ten years side by side, from 2001 to 2010. Then, underneath that line of figures which collectively represent a decade, let's have another line that represents a further decade, the one in which we are currently living, by means of the figures from 2011 to 2020, and then another line and so on until we have ten such lines of ten years each, at which point let's leave one blank line – as a kind of paragraph spacing – in order that the century of dates that we've listed from 2001 to 2100 might be clearly delineated. After that visually-useful blank line we can move on through the years of the next century, and so on for the full length of the page, in all fifty lines of figures set out in five paragraphs of ten lines each, and all in ten columns. In that way, we have neatly listed on one page all the years from 2001 to 2500, a full five centuries of year-dates.

Good. But let's not stop there. Let's follow that page with one that sets out in the same neat arrangement all the prospective years from 2501 to 3000. In fact, let's have those two pages facing each other in a double-page spread, and we can have an entire millennium of years spread out before us. And let's carry on in the same way, with the potential years set out page after page, half-millennium after half-millennium, until we've reached one million years into the future, spread out over two thousand pages. If you can imagine all that, then you have imagined On Kawara's work, *One Million Years (Future)*, and you can similarly conceptualize his companion work, *One Million Years (Past)*, which applies the same process to year-dates of the past, working its way back through the centuries to just two millennia short of the year One Million BC.

Well, it's a thought-provoking experience to see such a list of years, even to imagine them. The artist out of whose initial imagination those books arose, On Kawara, has long been fascinated by the notion of the inexorable passing of time, and one wonders how much time it must have taken him to produce those pages and pages of time-symbols. But as you contemplate the seemingly endless columns of year-dates, you realize that in those terms your own life consists of only a few lines; that whole empires rose and fell within a single page; that all of recorded human history spans no more than a dozen or so pages. As the art critic Richard Dorment put it, "Suddenly, you have a tiny glimpse of the awesome expanse of time, a sense of your own brief flicker of life across a medium in which 20,000 years is but one chapter" [*Daily Telegraph*, 11.12.02, p. 23].

Now some people might find that sort of contemplation rather unsettling. We perhaps prefer to think of ourselves as bestriding our times somewhat more majestically than a wide-angle lens might reveal to be the case. And for that matter it's not always psychologically helpful for us to dwell on just how infinitesimal we might be in the grand scheme of things. But there are times when stepping out of the immediate time-frame in which we are caught up, and contemplating matters from what might be called a higher perspective, is very worthwhile indeed, and from time to time it can be intriguing to step for a moment into a different kind of time-frame.

I'm referring to the fact that today's reading from the Old Testament is taken from the book of Daniel, a book that has much to say about time, and yet its time-talk can seem almost incomprehensible to us. The creators of the book of Daniel sought to

step out of their immediate time-frame, with their experiences of anguish and oppression, and to envision a broader sweep of virtually cosmic history. They tried to look beyond the moments of time in which they were buffeted and frustrated, to cast their eyes over the parapets towards what they call variously “the appointed time of the end” [Daniel 8:19] or “the decreed end” [9:27] or simply “the time of the end” [11:40; 12:9]. On occasions they get caught up in speculation about supposedly precise lengths of time, speaking at one place of a period of “2,300 evenings and mornings” [8:14], or at another place of a period of “70 weeks” [9:24], or at yet another place, in the reading that we heard earlier, of a period of “1,290 days” [12:11] – although did you notice that they immediately change their minds about the last figure and recalibrate it as “1,335 days” in the very next sentence [12:12]?

All of these enticing figures have provided seemingly fertile ground for naïve souls ever since to keep trying to calculate and recalculate “the time of the end” from the figures in the book of Daniel (combined, of course, with selected figures from the book of Revelation). But the overall time-talk of Daniel, stated near the beginning and again near the end of the catalogue of visions, is thoroughly imprecise and enigmatic: How long shall the evil empire stand? “For a time, times, and half a time” [7:25]. How long shall it be until the end of the wonders spoken of in today’s reading? “For a time, times, and half a time” [12:7].

Right, so that’s clear, then. The compilers of the book of Daniel didn’t know, any more than you or I do, the time of the end. They couldn’t even be sure how long they were to be caught up in the particular epoch of time in which they found themselves. They knew that they were living in a time of incessant warfare, a time when the latest set of imperial authorities that were constantly angling for control of the land of Judah had abolished the normal worship services at the temple in Jerusalem and had erected an offensive pagan statue at that very site. In the thick of that experience, it must have seemed to some that the clouds would never lift. But for others, our Daniel scribes among them, the eye of faith and hope, though it cannot know the precise timings even when it yearns to know them, does see something of a bigger time-scale than the moment-by-moment drudgery and anguish that can so easily get on top of us when the world seems hell-bent on a godless path. And for one glorious moment, those scribes broke right out of all our normally-understood time-frames when they proclaimed:

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” [12:1-3]

Now that’s what I call an earth-shattering vision. It steps right outside of the box of general Old Testament thinking, and puts forward for the first time the idea of resurrection, an idea that earlier parts of the Hebrew scriptures hadn’t dared to canvas but an idea whose time had come. Pharisees and Sadducees might disagree about it later, but no one could ignore it any longer. It was Daniel chapter 12 verse 2 that established the concept of resurrection within biblical religion, both Jewish and Christian, and in hearing it read here today we too step for a moment outside of our normal time coordinates.

Just for a moment, though. In choosing this famous pericope on time and the times from the book of Daniel to take a place in your contemplations this term on “God, Faith, and Time”, I am not wanting you to get caught up in fruitless end-time speculation. We should note, indeed, the words of Jesus in the reading from the New Testament that we heard earlier: “About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father... You do not know when the time will come” [Mark 13:32-33].

Yes, we simply don’t know how much more time will pass before the long-anticipated time of the end, and no amount of musing over the enigmatic numbers inscribed in the book of Daniel will make us any the wiser about that. Perhaps it will be infinitely more than the million years that the artist On Kawara has set down on paper in the pages of his work *One Million Years (Future)* that I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks today, or perhaps it will be appreciably less than that. “The End” in any grand sense certainly seems to have been considerably longer than Daniel’s contemporaries could have imagined that “a time, times, and half a time” could last, just as there have been far more “times of anguish” for Daniel’s people and for the world in general than they could have predicted.

But yet the final words of the book of Daniel, with which this evening’s Old

Testament reading closed, are surely words that we can still take to heart so many years after they were written and no matter how many years may yet remain:
“Happy are those who persevere.... You shall rise for your reward at the end of days” [12:12-13].

May it be so. *Amen.*