

The Religion of the Roman Empire

Daniel 11:38-39

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 347-357
emphasis added; English updated.

Daniel 11:38-39 “But in his estate he shall honor a god of fortresses; and a god which his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and pleasant things. Thus he shall act against the strongest fortresses with a foreign god, which he shall acknowledge, *and* advance *its* glory; and he shall cause them to rule over many, and divide the land for gain.”

The Romans were prideful worshippers of themselves.

As I have already hinted, at the first glance these statements seem opposed to each other; the king of whom we are now treating shall despise all deities, and yet shall worship a certain god in no ordinary way. **This agrees very well with the Romans, if we study their dispositions and manners.** As they treated the worship of their deities simply as a matter of business, they were evidently destitute of any perception of the divinity, and were only pretenders to religion.

Although other profane nations groped their way in darkness, yet they offered a superstitious worship to some divinities. The Romans, however, were not subject to either error or ignorance, but they manifested a gross contempt of God, while they maintained the appearance of piety. We gather this opinion from a review of their whole conduct.

For although they fetched many deities from every quarter of the world, and worshipped in common with other nations **Minerva, Apollo, Mercury**, and others, yet we observe how they treated all other rites as worthless. They considered **Jupiter as the supreme deity**. But what was Jupiter to them in his own country? Did they value him a single farthing, or the Olympian deity? No, they derided both his worshippers and himself. What then really was their supreme god? why the glow of the Capitol [at Rome]; without the additional title of Lord of the Capitol, he was nobody at all. That title distinguished him as specially bound to themselves.

For this reason the Prophet calls this Roman Jupiter *a god of bulwarks*, or of powers. The Romans could never be persuaded that any other **Jupiter** or **Juno** were worthy of worship; they relied upon their own inherent strength, considered themselves of more importance than the gods, and claimed Jupiter as theirs alone. Because his seat was in their capital [Rome], he was more to them than a hundred heavenly rulers, for **their pride** had centered the whole power of the deity in their own capital. They thought themselves beyond the reach of all changes of fortune, and such was their audacity, that every one fashioned new deities according to his pleasure.

There was a temple dedicated to fortune on horseback; for this gratified the vanity of the general who had made good use of his cavalry, and obtained a victory by their means; and in building a temple to equestrian fortune, he wished the multitude to esteem himself as a deity. Then Jupiter Stator was a god, and why? because this pleased somebody else; and thus Rome became full of temples. One erected an image of fortune, another of virtue, a third of prudence, and a fourth of any other divinity, and **every one dared to set up his own idols according to his fancy, till Rome was completely filled with**

them. In this way Romulus was deified; and what claim had he to this honor? If anyone object here—other nations did the same—we admit it, but we also know in what a foolish, brutal, and barbarous state of antiquity they continued.

But **the Romans**, as I have already intimated, were not instigated to this manufacture of idols by either error or superstition, but by **an arrogant vanity which elevated themselves to the first rank among mankind, and claimed superiority over all deities.** For instance, they allowed a temple to be erected to themselves in Asia, and sacrifices to be offered, and the name of deity to be applied to them. What pride is here! Is this a proof of belief in the existence of either one god or many? Rome is surely the only deity—and she must be reverently worshipped before all others!

We observe then how the expression of this verse is very applicable to the Romans; *they worshipped the god of bulwarks*, meaning, they claimed a divine power as their own, and only granted to their gods what they thought useful for their own purposes. With the view of claiming certain virtues as their own, they invented all kinds of deities according to their taste.

. . . Again, we know in what remarkable honor they esteemed “the good goddess.” The male sex were entirely ignorant of her nature, and none but females entered the house of the high priest, and there celebrated her orgies. And for what purpose? What was that “good goddess?”

Surely there always existed this *god of bulwarks*, since **the Romans acknowledged no deity but their own selves. They erected altars to themselves, and sacrificed all kinds of victims to their own success and good fortune;** and in this way they reduced all deities within their own sway, while they offered them only the specious and deceptive picture of reverence.

There is nothing forced in the expression of the angel—*he will pay no attention to the gods of his fathers*; meaning, he will not follow the usual custom of all nations in retaining superstitious ceremonies with error and ignorance. For although the Greeks were very acute, yet they did not dare to make any movement, or propose any discussions on religious matters. One thing we know to be fixed among them, to worship the gods which had been handed down by their fathers.

The Romans tolerated many gods and religions, but, in reality, they were atheists and worshippers of themselves.

But the Romans dared to insult all religions with freedom and petulance, and to promote atheism as far as they possibly could. Therefore the angel says, he *should pay attention to the god of his fathers.* And why? They will have regard to themselves, and acknowledge no deity except their own confidence in their peculiar fortitude.

The Romans lacked natural affections.

I interpret the phrase, *the desire of women*, as denoting by that figure of speech which puts a part for the whole [i.e., synecdoche], **the barbarity of their manners.**

The love of women is a scriptural phrase for very peculiar affection; and God has instilled this mutual affection into the sexes to cause them to remain united together as long as they retain any spark of humanity. Thus David is said to have loved Jonathan beyond or surpassing the love of women (2 Samuel 1:26). No fault is there found with

this agreement, otherwise the love of David towards Jonathan would be marked with disgrace. We know how sacred his feelings were towards him, but “the love of women” is here used *par excellence*, implying the exceeding strength of this affection.

As therefore **God has appointed this very stringent bond of affection between the sexes as a natural bond of union throughout the human race**, it is not surprising if all the duties of humanity are comprehended under this word by a figure of speech. It is just as if the angel had said: this king of whom he prophesies should be impious and sacrilegious, in thus daring to despise all deities; then he should be so evil, as to be utterly devoid of every feeling of charity.

We observe then **how completely the Romans were without natural affection, loving neither their wives nor the female sex**. I need not refer to even a few examples by which this assertion may be proved. But throughout the whole nation such extreme barbarity existed, that it ought really to fill us with horror. None can obtain an adequate idea of this, without becoming thoroughly versed in their histories; but whoever will study their exploits, will behold as in a mirror the angel’s meaning.

The Romans were full of pride, self-confidence, and self-esteem. They lacked love for God and humanity.

This king, then, should cultivate neither piety nor humanity. *And he shall not pay attention to other gods, because he shall magnify himself against them all.* The cause is here assigned why this king should be a gross despiser of all deities, and fierce and barbarous against all mortals, *because he should magnify himself above them all.* That **pride** so blinded the Romans, as to cause them to forget both piety and humanity; and so **this intolerable self-confidence** of theirs was the reason why they paid no honor to any deity, and trampled all mortals under foot.

Humility is certainly the beginning of all true piety; and this seed of religion is implanted in the heart of man, causing them whether they will or not to acknowledge some deity. But the Romans were so puffed up by self-consequence [the importance of self], as to exalt themselves above every object of adoration, and to treat all religions with contemptuous scorn; and in thus despising all celestial beings, they necessarily looked down on all mankind, which was literally and notoriously the fact.

Now, the second clause is opposed to this, *He shall worship or honor the god of fortitudes*. He had previously used this word of the Temple, but this explanation does not seem suitable here, because the angel had before expressed the unity of God, while he now enumerates many gods. But the angel uses the word “fortitudes” or “munitions” for that perverse confidence by which the Romans were puffed up, and were induced to treat both God and men as nothing in comparison to themselves.

How then did these two points agree—the contempt of all deities among the Romans, and yet the existence of some worship? First, they despised all tradition respecting the gods, but afterwards they raised themselves above every celestial object, and becoming ashamed of their barbarous impiety, they pretended to honor their deities. But where did they seek those deities, as **Jupiter** for instance, to whom all the tribe of them were subject? why, in their own capitol [Rome]. **Their deities were the offspring of their own imaginations, and nothing was esteemed divine but what pleased themselves.** Hence it is said, *He shall honor him in his own place*. Here the angel removes all doubt, by mentioning the place in which this god of fortitudes should be honored.

The Romans venerated other deities wherever they met with them, but this was mere outward pretense. Without doubt they limited Jupiter to his own capitol and city; and whatever they professed respecting other divinities, there was no true religion in them, because **they adored themselves** in preference to those fictitious beings. Hence *he shall worship the god of ramparts in his place, and shall honor a strange god whom his Fathers did not know.*

Again, *He shall honor him in gold, and silver, and precious stones, and all desirable things;* meaning, he shall worship his own deity magnificently and with remarkable pomp. And we know how the riches of the whole world were heaped together to ornament their temples. For as soon as any one purposed to erect any temple, he was compelled to seize all things in every direction, and so to spoil all provinces to enrich their own temples. Rome, too, did not originate this splendor for the sake of superstition, but only to raise itself and to become the admiration of all nations; and thus we observe how well this prophecy is explained by the course of subsequent events.

Some nations, in truth, were superstitious in the worship of their idols, but the Romans were superior to all the rest. When first they became masters of Sicily, we know what an amount of wealth they abstracted from a single city. For if ever any temples were adorned with great and copious splendor and much riches, surely they would confess the extreme excellence of those of Sicily. But Marcellus stripped almost all temples to enrich Rome and to ornament the shrines of their false deities. And why so? Was it because **Jupiter**, and **Juno**, and **Apollo**, and **Mercury**, were better at Rome than elsewhere? By no means; but because he wished to enrich the city, and to turn all sorts of deities into a laughingstock, and to lead them in triumph, to show that there was no other deity or excellence except at Rome, the mistress of the world.

He afterwards adds, *He shall perform.* Here, again, the angel seems to speak of prosperity. Without doubt he would here supply courage to the pious, who would otherwise vacillate and become backsliders when they observed such continued and incredible success, in a nation so impious and sacrilegious, and remarkable for such barbarous cruelty. Hence he states how the Romans should obtain their ends in whatever they attempted, if their fortitude should prevail, as if it were their deity. Although they should despise all deities, and only fabricate a god for themselves through a spirit of ambition; yet even this should bring them success.

This is now called a *foreign deity*. Scripture uses this word to distinguish between fictitious [false] idols and the one true God. The angel seems to say nothing which applies especially to the Romans. For the Athenians and Spartans, the Persians and the Asiatics, as well as all other nations, worshipped strange gods. What, then, is the meaning of the name? for clearly the angel did not speak after the ordinary manner. He calls him *strange*, as he was not handed down from one to another; for while they boasted vainly in their veneration of the idols received from their ancestors, together with all their sacred institutions and their inviolable rites, yet they inwardly derided them, and did not esteem them worth a straw, but only wished to retain some fallacious form of religion through a sense of shame.

We remember the saying of Cato concerning the augurs [A group of ancient Roman religious officials who foretold events by observing and interpreting signs and omens.], "I wonder when one meets another how he can refrain from laughing!" thus showing how he ridiculed them. If anyone had asked Cato either in the senate or privately, What do you think of the augurs and all our religion? he would reply, "Ah! let the whole world

perish before the augurs; for these constitute the very safety of the people and of the whole republic. We received them from our ancestors, therefore let us keep them forever!" Thus that crafty fellow would have spoken, and thus also would all others. But while they prated thus to each other, they were not ashamed to deny the existence of a Deity, and so to ridicule whatever had been believed from the very beginning, as entirely to reduce to nothing the traditions received from their forefathers.

It does not surprise us to find the angel speaking of a *strange god* which was worshipped at Rome, not, as I have said, through superstition or mistake, but only to prevent their barbarity from becoming abominable throughout the world. *That God*, says he, *whom he had acknowledged*: great weight is attached to this word. The angel means, that the whole divinity rested on the opinion and will of the sovereign people, because it was agreeable to its inclination, and promoted its private interest. As the plan of worshipping any gods would be approved, and they would pride themselves in their own pleasure, they should boast with great confidence, that there could be no piety but at Rome. But why so? Because they acknowledge strange gods, and determine and decree the form of worship which was to be preserved. **The angel thus places the whole of the religion of Rome in lust, and shows them to be impure despisers of God. . . .**

PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, as in all ages the blindness of mankind has been so great as to lead them to worship You erroneously and superstitiously, and since they manifest such duplicity and pride as to despise Your name, and also the very idols which they have fashioned for themselves: Grant, I pray, that true piety may be deeply rooted in our hearts. May the fear of Your name be so engraven within us, that we may be sincerely and unreservedly devoted to You. May each of us heartily desire to glorify Your name, and may we endeavor to lead our brethren in the same course. Purge us, O God, more and more from all dissimulation, until at length we arrive at that perfect purity which is laid up for us in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord. — Amen.