

Nebuchadnezzar's Psychosis: Man-Made Ecological Disaster
and its Possible Cultural Healing

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I want to speak about two issues which are closely linked:

The madness of a leading and powerful politician, and an ecological dilemma.

1. Madness – Nebuchadnezzar’s Psychosis



Image 1 William Blake's Nebuchadnezzar (1805)

Imagine: The most powerful man in the world becomes mad. One day he leaves his palace, he walks on four legs, he starts eating grass like the animals, he sleeps outdoors under the sky and becomes wet from the dew. He neglects his body, doesn't cut hair and nails, and finally he looks like the beggars and homeless people he never knew about. This goes for "7 times", maybe 7 months or 7 years. Then one day he wakes up and returns in his former position. He even writes about the strange eclipse that happened to him.

I am not speaking about the U.S. President. You can read the story in the Bible, in the Book of Daniel. The fallen mightiest man of the world was King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon who lived around 700 years before the Christian era. The king had, and this is different from Trump, a psychotherapist, who analyzed his dreams and was his councilor. This man had warned the king of the pending psychosis. It was Daniel, a Jewish man who lived as a war prisoner with his Jewish people in Exile in Babylon.

The unhappy fate of Nebuchadnezzar was not a simple madness or crisis of a dictator, a “Caesarenwahn”. It was, as I see it, a mental collapse and eclipse as a result of a cultural dilemma and vicious circle.

2. The problem of water

Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is today known as Iraq, is a paradigm of a human made ecological crisis. It was and is about water, the source of life. Mesopotamia in this regard was different from ancient Egypt: In Egypt the Nile, flowing from Central Afrique in the South to North, brought fertility with the annual flood in early spring, and the entire Egyptian mythology reflected the positive role of the Nile River. In Mesopotamia, the big rivers Euphrates and Tigris flew from North to South. The flood with melting water from Anatolia came in June; it was not calculable, often destroying the crop on the fields. But even worse: the country is so hot and flat that the waters evaporate faster than they flow through the land. The result is that the minerals from the earth come up und the soil becomes salty and infertile.



Image 2 Map of Ancient Mesopotamia

This was the problem in Southern Mesopotamia for 6000 years, from the earliest settlements, the Sumerian cities of Uruk, Ur or Lagash, on up till Nebuchadnezzar's time. Rain is not sufficient for agriculture there, and the only way to cultivate crops was to build dams, water channels for artificial irrigation and basins to retain the precious water of the rivers. But this led to a vicious circle. Modern techniques of drainage were not known (and not possible in the flat land?). The more you use irrigation without drainage the faster the soil becomes salty and infertile. In the centuries the growing of wheat was replaced by the more salt-resistant barley, and the centers of habitation and political power moved step by step upstream: from the old Sumerian settlements close to the sea upwards to Babylon, Assur or Nineveh. The Mesopotamian states were among the first in the history of civilizations to develop

water management. They developed not only the art of counting and writing, but also a harsh centralistic and often incredibly cruel social system. Nebuchadnezzar, one of the last kings of Babylon, was the heir to that age old ecological problem – and the symbolic and ritual means of a cultural coping with it.

3. The killing of the Mother

The dilemma was symbolized in the images of the gods. The former water goddess Tiamat, once the mother of all beings (like Gaia in old Greece), became a kind of a salt monster. She wanted to kill and destroy all her children and grandchildren. In an annual ritual this dragon (the famous Dragon of Babel) had to be overcome and slaughtered by the God-King Marduk. King Nebuchadnezzar, like the kings before him, had to fulfill Marduk's killing ritual of Tiamat every year at the New-years-fest of Akitu. The former mother goddess had to be killed, and out of her body the world had to be created again – this was to happen every year in a 12-day collective ritual. If the king was not successful the entire world was lost and time would end. During the annual ritual chaos, extinction anxiety filled the city and the state with panic and horror. During that ritual even the God-King was defeated and wounded, but reanimated by his wife Zarpanitou. At the end of these twelve days the King celebrated the Holy Wedding (Hierosgamos) with Marduk's wife/the priestess on the top of the Tower of Babylon, the Ziggurat 90 meters above the flat ground!

4. Vicious circle and cultural coping

King Nebuchadnezzar was very proud of his water management. He prized himself in having built many dams, water channels, dikes and walls against the destructive aspect of the water. He built Babylon up to be the most famous city in the world - but he was not able to fundamentally modify or heal the salty soil problem of his

kingdom. Also, his many extended wars to conquer other countries and seize their resources (like Israel and Egypt!) could not help with this problem. He made the dikes as high as possible, but the waters of his unconscious became even more dangerous. In his madness or psychosis I see the collective madness of his culture in its futile effort to manage the water problem through harsh practices. And - what should the people do if their gods became sadistic and destroyed the basis of the life of plants, animals and humans? This nightmare situation might remind the reader of Melanie Klein's scenarios of the double bind dynamic of schizophrenic relationships.

In the short space of this paper, I cannot develop the many details and aspects of the thrilling story of the 12 days Akitu-Ritual. As we heard the wife of God Marduk, called Zarpanitu, played a role in the drama. She loved her husband and reanimated him, and as the high priestess she celebrated the Hierosgamos with the King – at the top of the highest tower in the world which was built to link heaven and earth. But in the days before, a collective panic possessed the people. What if Tiamat would win the battle, what if the soil of the country became salty and infertile again and forever? This was the big cultural complex and repetitive trauma of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. Today with Tom Singer we call it Extinction Anxiety.

5. Conclusion for us

The king becoming mad, walking on four legs, eating grass like an animal, sleeping outdoors in the morning dew – this was a warning for his culture. Nebuchadnezzar was warned by his therapist, the prophet Daniel: Do penitence, don't forget that your power was given to you from heaven, don't abuse it! Put an end to toying with or violating nature!

Imagine for a moment that our politicians, the shareholders of the big companies, all those responsible for today's Ecocide, would read the story of Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible's Book of Daniel. Can we imagine their being able to anticipate consciously the psychotic madness of Nebuchadnezzar and its meaning for their civilization? Can we imagine this for our own civilization?

Shall we all try to learn from and to anticipate the collective madness of our own relationship to the natural world? Maybe, we all are already walking on four legs without knowing it. To realize this would be a lesson in humility, or to feel the dew on our skin. Otherwise, the manmade destruction of our world will overcome us and we will be thrown out of our kingdom without return.

It is a strong image: To feel the dew on the skin, the soft humidity of the early morning; or to walk on four legs, to have the closest contact with the soil, instead of our mind-oriented rationalistic psychology - to come down, to renew our connection with what we call the Ego-Self-Axis. To learn how animals feel. Nebuchadnezzar's madness appears to be a kind of healing. In the madness itself is the healing. As Jung said: If you don't follow it voluntarily, your fate will pull you against your will. The psychotic crisis leads Nebuchadnezzar and could lead us back to a restored relationship to nature.

By the way: Nebuchadnezzar, after "7 times" became sane again. He woke up and returned to his position as king. He honored his therapist Daniel and praised Daniel's G-d.

There is another parallel story, contemporary to that of Daniel. It is the Book of Jonah, the reluctant prophet, who was sent to preach in the city of Nineveh to urge a dramatic change in how it was living. Some of you know it from the liturgy of Yom

Kippur. As you remember, Jonah was swallowed by the whale (another water-monster!). But after 3 days and nights he was ready to get a second call by G-d: Go to Nineveh! On his inner journey Jonah now was ready to follow the call.

Nineveh was saved because G-d felt compassion for the animals and the children. Let us hope that we, too, will get a second call!

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