

“For He has Saved Daniel from the Power of the Lions”: The Book of Daniel’s Queer and Trans/gressive Spirituality

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Abstract

This essay proposes that the Hebrew Scriptures’ “Book of Daniel” offers powerful spiritual resources for Queer and trans folk in the contemporary world. First, this essay describes the four strands of Queer theology offered by Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng. Second, this essay employs these strands as a liberatory hermeneutic to analyze Daniel’s transgressive text, ambiguous characters, folk stories, apocalyptic visions, and unifying theme. In doing so, this essay interrogates Daniel’s multivalent spirituality that resists empire while trusting in God. Finally, this essay suggests that Daniel reveals an embodied spirituality of resistance-and-faith for present-day Queer and trans* folk to unmask and resist necropolitical hegemony in ways that deepen hope and trust in God’s justice and coming reign.*

Introduction

“No book of the Hebrew Bible so plainly engages and opposes the project of empire as Daniel.”
-Anathea E. Portier-Young¹

“If queer theory is about the politics of resistance and indeterminacy (and it is), then Daniel is one of the queerest books of the Bible.” -Mona West²

¹ Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 223.

² Mona West, “Daniel,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 427.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

“When what is at stake is the literal livability of one’s very life and the fundamental wellbeing of those with whom one is intersubjectively connected, then a radical, queer reconstruction must take place, even if that means we become transgressive theologians...” -Cody J. Sanders³

This essay explores the book of Daniel’s transgressive text, ambiguous central character, folk stories and apocalyptic visions, and unifying theme through a liberatory hermeneutic of Queer and trans*⁴ theologies in order to reveal a spirituality of resistance-and-faith for Queer and trans* folk. First, it will summarize four themes of Queer and trans* theologies that will be interwoven throughout the essay. Then, this essay will demonstrate ways in which Daniel “is one of the queerest books in the Bible.”⁵ In doing so, it will interrogate aspects of the United States’ treatment of Queer and trans* children. Finally, this essay will suggest how the book of Daniel can offer Queer and trans* folk a multivalent spirituality that deconstructs empire while trusting in God’s justice. Ultimately, this essay proposes that the book of Daniel is a spiritual resource for Queer and trans* folk to unmask and resist necropolitical, imperial hegemony in ways that deepen hope in God’s coming reign.

Part I: Queer and Trans* Theologies

Queer and trans* theologies are “queer [and trans*] talk about God”⁶ that center LGBTQIA+ persons’ embodied experiences of life and death, joy and suffering, and isolation

³ Cody J. Sanders, *Christianity, LGBTQ Suicide, and the Souls of Queer Folk*, Emerging Perspectives in Pastoral Theology and Care (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 104.

⁴ The identity of “trans*” is complex and intentionally elusive. Whereas Queer often refers to non-normative sexuality and relationality, trans* often refers to non-normative gender expression and embodiment of physical sex. The asterisk (*) signifies that the identity is also an umbrella term, as being trans* moves beyond the rigidity and limits of male-to-female or female-to-male transition and exists within and beyond sex and gender spectra. Kathy Steinmetz, “The Oxford English Dictionary Added ‘Trans*.’ Here’s What the Label Means,” *Time*, April 3, 2018, <https://time.com/5211799/what-does-trans-asterisk-star-mean-dictionary/>.

⁵ West, “Daniel,” 427.

⁶ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2011), 2. It often, but not necessarily, directly intersects with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God and faith traditions.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

and community. The goal of much of these theologies is not merely apologetics, assimilation, or acceptance, but a transformation of the very “values, definitions, and laws that make [contemporary] institutions and relationships oppressive” for Queer and trans* folk.⁷ They resist the sin and death at the root of necropolitical, imperial domination and create room for a connection to the lifegiving force at the heart of existence. To engage Queer and trans* theologies in conversation with the book of Daniel, this essay will utilize the “four strands of queer theology” offered by Queer theologian, the Rev. Dr. Patrick Cheng.

The first strand, “identity without essence,” draws from apophatic theologies and explores God’s existence outside of the limitations of human categorization or language. Queer and trans* experiences of identity are ambiguous and often powerfully connect with concepts beyond the barriers of current cognitive and social constructs.⁸ The second strand, “transgression,” involves the crossing and “destruction of ‘traditional boundaries’ or the undermining of ‘established paradigms.’”⁹ Citing the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, Cheng sees Christian theology itself as “fundamentally queer to the extent that it transgresses and challenges the world’s religious, political, and sexual norms.”¹⁰ The third strand, “resisting binaries,” contests essentialized pairs, such as “male/female complementarity,” homosexual/heterosexual, religious/secular, and even human/divine, that function as barriers to

⁷ Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 29.

⁸ Patrick S. Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 160. Cheng specifically references Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas.

⁹ Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” 160. Here, Cheng references the work of Robert Shore-Goss.

¹⁰ Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” 161. Once more citing the work of Robert Shore-Goss, Cheng also notes that transgression is “at the heart of queer theologies because queer theology ‘turns upside down, inside out, and defies heteronormative and homonormative theologies.’”

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

inclusion to many religious traditions.¹¹ This strand instead focuses on the spectra of human embodiment, expression, and particularity.¹²

The fourth strand analyses the “social construction” of compulsory cultural scripts for sex and gender.¹³ This analysis is necessary in the context of hegemonic political, social, and religious practices that enforce subordination through a subtle internalization of conventional customs.¹⁴ Dominant categories and characteristics are made normative, and those who fall outside of these suffer increased violence and death.¹⁵ This is what decolonial theory terms *necropolitics*, “which describes a form of power that marks some fraction of a population for death even while it deems other fractions suitable for life-enhancing investment.”¹⁶ This is evidenced in the U.S. Department of Justice’s “2017 National Crime Victimization Survey,” which found that “the odds of violent victimization among [sexual and gender minorities] were almost four times that of non-[sexual and gender minorities].”¹⁷ Populations whose bodies are marked as “other” are used by empires as necropolitical tools, and queer theology works to unmask and remake this.

¹¹ Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” 162.

¹² Virginia R. Mollenkott, *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 18-20.

¹³ Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” 163-164.

¹⁴ Joerg Rieger, “Chapter 1: Christian Theology and Empires,” in *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*. eds. Kwok Pui-lan, Don. H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁵ Riley C. Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁶ In conversation with Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, Achille Mbembe coined the term “necropolitics” in 2003. Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” 66.

¹⁷ Andrew R. Flores et al., “Victimization Rates and Traits of Sexual and Gender Minorities in the United States: Results from the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2017,” *Science Advances* 6, no. 40 (October 2, 2020): <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aba6910>.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

The four strands of Queer and trans* theologies call for the dismantling of tightly-held anthropological and ethical convictions that, instead of occurring naturally, were often developed within systems of historical power for the purposes of classifying, pathologizing, regulating, and marginalizing.¹⁸ Conversely, employing the four strands of Queer and trans* theologies as hermeneutical lenses through which to exegete the book of Daniel¹⁹ can reveal models of resistance and spiritualities of hope for Queer and trans* persons.²⁰

Part 2: Daniel’s Inherent Queerness & Trans/gressiveness

The book of Daniel intersects with the four strands of Queer and trans* theologies explained above. The text’s inherent queerness and trans/gressiveness of its nature is evident in Daniel’s textual construction, its main character, and selected themes and stories.

The Queerness Behind the Text: Constructing the Book of Daniel

The book of Daniel is queer in its historical-linguistic construction, transtemporal and transcultural influences and development, and transgressive cosmology and epistemology.²¹ The overlapping and intersecting literary genres in the book of Daniel include folk tales, narrative histories, prophetic dream interpretations, and apocalyptic visions. Some sections were originally

¹⁸ Cheng, “Contributions from Queer Theory,” 164.

¹⁹ This process can assist Queer and trans* persons in responding *Dei verbum*’s (§12) call to engage in sound scriptural scholarship so that “the Church may mature.”

²⁰ Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 140-141.

²¹ Felix Just, “Jewish and Christian Bibles: A Comparative Chart,” Catholic Resources for Bible, Liturgy, Art, and Theology, June 11, 2021, <https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Heb-Xn-Bibles%20Chart.pdf>.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

written in Hebrew, and others in Aramaic and Greek,²² which partially explains its disparate placement across religious canons.²³ The book of Daniel defies singular literary characterization and construction while maintaining a singular, though ambiguous, underlying theme. Images and leitmotifs of Daniel’s visions are drawn from various ancient Near Eastern cultures²⁴ and notably “share features with the Babylonian divinatory wisdom (such as dream interpretation).”²⁵ Notably, instead of simply replicating and transposing aspects of the foreign and imperial myths of the time into the book of Daniel, its authors and editors reshaped them to create something new to offer models of human resistance and Divine reassurance.

The Queerness Within the Text: Daniel the Visionary Eunuch

Set in Babylon in the 6th Century, BCE, the book of Daniel’s first few verses establish the narrative context of forced imperial hegemony, theft of human bodies to maintain power and dominance, and a compulsory shift in name, lifestyle, and identity. In Daniel 1, after the Babylonian empire besieged Judah, the conquered people were forced to send several young men of noble lineage to serve in the royal courts of Nebuchadnezzar, and eventually Belshazzar and Darius. One of these men, Daniel, navigates his ambiguous identity that resists the binary of pious Jew and Babylonian courtesan by inhabiting both simultaneously. Through these stories,

²² Originally, chapters 1:1-2:4a and 8-12 were written in Hebrew, chapters 2:4b-7 were written in Aramaic, and chapters 13-14 were written in Greek. Paul V. Niskanen, “Daniel,” in *The New Collegeville Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 853-854.

²³ In the Hebrew *Tanach*, the book of Daniel is located within the *Ketuvim/Writings*, not the *Nevi'im/Prophets*, even though Josephus and Maimonides refer to Daniel as a “prophet.” All Christian Biblical traditions have placed the book of Daniel in their particular *Prophets* sections. Anthea E. Portier-Young, “Daniel and Apocalyptic Imagination,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, ed. Carolyn J. Sharp, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 225-227.

²⁴ John J. Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1997), 141-146.

²⁵ Portier-Young, “Daniel and Apocalyptic Imagination,” 228.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

the spirituality of a “no” or resistance to empire’s necropolitical ways of life is complemented with the deeper spirituality of a “yes” to trust in God’s ordering of the cosmos and intervention in human history. This *both/and* reality “makes it possible for Jews such as Daniel to reconcile temporary loyalty to Gentile monarchs with their permanent loyalty to the Most High God.”²⁶ Throughout the text, including the famous story of an angel protecting Daniel from the mouth of “the lion,” a symbol the Book of Esther also uses for imperial officers who plan to eradicate the Israelite people, Daniel places his ultimate trust in “his God” (6:6) even and especially when this is criminalized (6:8).

Daniel’s process of identity transformation is simultaneously one of interior discernment, immediate survival, and personal-social-religious-political resistance.²⁷ This includes what may have been done by the empire to his sexual organs outside of his consent and control.²⁸ In order to protect their own patrilineal transfer of status and wealth, and to disrupt the same in subjugated populations, many ancient Near Eastern empires physically altered adolescent males into the “third gender” of eunuch.²⁹ Mona West notes that in addition to castration, eunuchs in royal courts “were identified by their dress, mannerisms and even the food they ate.”³⁰ In 1:8-10, Daniel’s refusal to eat ritually “defiled” Babylonian food in deference to his own God demonstrates his learning to transgress the boundaries of imperial control, deconstruct socially-prescribed behaviors, and navigate challenging the binary of court eunuch/pious Jew. This takes

²⁶ Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, 137.

²⁷ “Que(e)rying” is a method used by queer academics to critically and scholarly to investigate the ambiguity of queerness and trans*ness of a theory, religion, concept, text, etc.

²⁸ There is no documented information about this either way; however, as Daniel observes some of the Mosaic Law surrounding food, it is understandable that he would not desire his own castration, as is shamed in Leviticus 21:20 and Deuteronomy 23:1-2.

²⁹ At the time, being a eunuch meant castration, specifically having one’s testes, and at times also the penis and scrotum, “destroyed or removed.” See Francois P. Retief and Louise Cilliers, “Eunuchs in the Bible,” *Acta Theologica*, no. 7, Supplementum (June 30, 2005): 248, <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/2093>.

³⁰ West, “Daniel,” 428.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

shape as an inner navigation of his spiritual desires and commitment to his faith and people and then extends to his external choices and actions in contradiction to further forced bodily inscription and augmentation.

As was the case with other embodiments of this ancient literary archetype, Daniel-as-eunuch was a master of dream interpretation, and God eventually made him a “seer”³¹ of visions of his own. In many cultures, and especially in the book of Daniel, dreams and visions are the queer and symbolic language of the Divine that dissolve the boundaries between God’s domain and the world. Daniel’s “vision-in-a-dream” in 2:23 recognizes that it is God’s “wisdom and power” that enables Daniel’s gift. In addition, John Collins notes that the central theme of the dreams of chapters 1-6 and apocalyptic visions of chapters 7-12 is “the sovereignty or kingship of God.”³² These specific instances of queer and transgressive resistance to Babylon’s imperial necropolitics are also a profound invitation for the Jewish people to trust that the justice of God’s reign would eventually arrive. As Collins states, “the power of the vision lies in its evocation of a pattern which *transcends* any particular historical situation.”³³ The origins and eventual usages of the symbolic imagery presented as Daniel’s visions have transcended culture and time and can still be used by “the powerless” to help form and sustain a biblical spirituality of resistance to empire and trust in God’s coming reign.³⁴

The Queerness in Front of the Text: Queer and Trans Folk Encounter*

Daniel

³¹ Portier-Young, “Daniel and Apocalyptic Imagination,” 228.

³² Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, 136.

³³ Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, 154-155.

³⁴ John J. Collins, *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 131.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

Contemporary U.S. political and ecclesial contexts with respect to sex and gender consist of socially-constructed binaries, inaccurate theologies, and imperial power at the expense of the bodies of the marginalized and oppressed. In 2022, a record number of legislative bills targeting trans* persons were introduced into local and national politics.³⁵ The vast majority of the anti-trans* bills, “about 86%,” targeted trans* children.³⁶ A story in the *Washington Post* notes that “Dave Carney, a senior adviser for [Greg] Abbott’s reelection campaign, called restrictions of trans youth ‘a 75, 80 percent winner’ for the Texas governor.”³⁷ These policies have direct consequences on the lives of real children. Through his tears, and changing his name for his interview “to protect his identity,” Rory, “a trans teenager living in Austin, TX,” shares his reflection about this legislation: “I didn’t know how terrible I felt about myself until I got to, you know, become myself and see how strong I can be, and how, you know, beautiful I could become. And it breaks my heart that any child could have that taken away from them. And I hope, I hope, no child ever has to go through that.”³⁸ Rev. Remington Olivia Johnson, a “trans activist, Presbyterian minister, [and] ICU Nurse,” questions this dominant culture: “What does this mean for a society that allows [...] *one particular type of child* to be singled-out, fundraised-against, vilified in the public square, legislated against, terrorized?”³⁹ Rev. Johnson’s questions

³⁵ The American Civil Liberties Union defines “anti-trans” legislation: “These measures target transgender and nonbinary people for discrimination, such as by barring or criminalizing healthcare for trans youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting trans students’ ability to fully participate in school and sports, allowing religiously-motivated discrimination against trans people, or making it more difficult for them to get identification documents with their name and gender.” (ACLU, “Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights Across the Country,” *ACLU*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbtq-rights-across-country>.)

³⁶ Anna Casey, “Remaking America: Being a Trans Kid in Texas,” in *IA*, podcast, 34:11, <https://the1a.org/segments/1a-remaking-america-being-a-trans-kid-in-texas/>.

³⁷ Anne Branigan and N. Kirkpatrick, “Anti-Trans Laws Are on the Rise. Here’s a Look at Where — and What Kind.,” *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/10/14/anti-trans-bills/>.

³⁸ Rory, interviewed in Casey, “Remaking America: Being a Trans Kid in Texas.”

³⁹ Rev. Remington Olivia Johnson, interviewed in Casey, “Remaking America: Being a Trans Kid in Texas.” Emphasis intoned in her speaking.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

deconstruct and resist the narratives undergirding the hegemonic normativity that requires necropolitical inscription onto the bodies of trans* children. Doing so makes space for creative alternatives.

The challenges facing trans* youth are not unique to the present moment, and resources for resistance can be found in scriptural narratives. Partially because Daniel himself experienced imperial legislation and forced bodily augmentation, Portier-Young suggests that the book of Daniel can serve as “a resource” for navigating this ambiguity.⁴⁰ She states that Daniel offers “models of wise discernment, courage, virtue, and piety in ever new cultural settings.”⁴¹ The “wonders” (12:6) of joy, happiness, and self-love resist the efforts of imperial power and control. Daniel’s similarity to contemporary experiences of compulsory bodily practices rooted in inadequate theological ideals and political legislation offers an entry point for Queer and trans* persons to engage in its spirituality of “no” to empire and “yes” to hope in God.

Part 3: Daniel’s Queer & Trans/gressive Spirituality of No-and-Yes

Suffering and oppression encourage surrender, and it could be easy for contemporary Queer and trans* folk to capitulate to despair and death in the face of their overwhelming experiences of empire. As such, they require a spirituality that meets their simultaneous needs of resistance to necropolitical imperialism and hope-filled faithfulness in God’s coming reign of justice. For Daniel, navigating personal and communal resistance to empire was bound up with his transgressive identity and trust in God’s ultimate keeping of God’s promises of covenant and

⁴⁰ Portier-Young, “Daniel and Apocalyptic Imagination,” 224.

⁴¹ Portier-Young, “Daniel and Apocalyptic Imagination,” 224.

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

liberation. In Daniel, contemporary Queer and trans* folk have an exemplar and invitation to creative perseverance, because Daniel does not hope and trust in a revolutionary idea, but in a relationship with the living God who Daniel and the Jewish people had already encountered.

Instead of conforming to or revolting against Babylon, Daniel wisely creates his own path of engaging it. Daniel’s trust in God does not negate his struggles or fears, nor does God grant him the power of his oppressors. Rather, what God gifts Daniel is a liberated and fecund imagination that births hope.⁴² Like queerness itself, hope in “the end” of empires in the apocalyptic chapters of Daniel 7-12 escapes singular meaning⁴³ and resists easy characterization, but it offers a way to understand God’s eschatological justice that was novel to Jewish cultic spirituality: “resurrection” (12:2).⁴⁴ Engaging this paradigm, Rev. Dr. Willie James Jennings writes of a “resistance needed not just as a pastoral intervention but a communal restructuring,” which requires “imagining a form of resistance that builds community.”⁴⁵ The trust and hope that the book of Daniel asks its readers to hold is that God will offer new life and transformation of their very selves and world in ways yet unknown and unknowable.

The trust in God’s reign at the root of Daniel’s “no” to imperial dominion continues to inspire the prophetic faithful through generations, up to the present. For Daniel and the Jewish people, this “yes”⁴⁶ is not siloed or unique, but a continuous response within an ongoing, covenantal relationship with the God whose creative spirit enters human history and liberates. Contemporary Queer and trans* folk who work for positive change in religion, politics, and

⁴² Daniel Berrigan, *Daniel: Under the Siege of the Divine* (Farmington, PA: Plough Pub. House, 1998), 92.

⁴³ Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, 164.

⁴⁴ Collins, *Seers, Sybils, and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism*, 164.

⁴⁵ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Theological Education Between the Times (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 72.

⁴⁶ Berrigan, *Daniel: Under the Siege of the Divine*, 91

Fagnant: “FOR HE HAS SAVED DANIEL FROM THE POWER OF THE LIONS”

culture are participating with the coming of God’s reign through their construction of concrete connection and community. When Queer and trans* folk resist imperialism that culturally commodifies, consumes, and disposes of their bodies and lives, and trust in and cooperate with the future promised by God, Daniel’s no-and-yes spirituality can guide and empower them.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that the book and character of Daniel offer a life-giving spirituality that resists necropolitical hegemony while simultaneously trusting in God’s promises of justice and resurrection. To do so, this essay engaged the hermeneutic lenses of the four strands of Queer and trans* theologies and established Daniel’s queerness and trans/gressivenss. Then, this essay proposed Daniel as a resource for contemporary Queer and trans* folk in their continuous struggle against imperial marginalization and oppression *and* for creatively participating in the new life of God’s reign. As evidenced by the growing number in calls in the United States for legislation targeting trans* children, many are desperate for Daniel’s form of spirituality. To close, this essay grants the book of Daniel (10:19) the final word: “He said, ‘Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!’ When he spoke to me, I was strengthened...”

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