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DANIEL 7: A VISION OF FUTURE WORLD HISTORY

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The vision of Daniel 7, like the dream of Daniel 2, gives a picture of history future to the time of the writing of the book of Daniel (ca. 6th century B.C.). Each of the four beasts represents a kingdom, the last one being Rome. The Roman empire has two phases, one past and one future. Correlations can be traced between Daniel 7 and the book of Revelation.

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INTRODUCTION

THE book of Daniel may be outlined as having two sections, the first section consisting of chaps. 1-6 and the second of chaps. 7-12. The vision in Daniel 7 portrays the same chronological order of events as is found in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan 2:31-45). It is important, however, to grasp the chronology of the book itself. The vision recorded in Daniel 7 occurred in approximately 553 B.C., fourteen years before the events recorded in chap. 5. Indeed, chaps. 7 and 8 (set as they are in the first and third years of the reign of Belshazzar) fit historically between chaps. 4 and 5.

Daniel 7 links with the first part of the book partly because it is in Aramaic and therefore seems to continue the narrative of 2:4-6:28, but also because it parallels the subject matter, particularly of chap. 2. Baldwin writes, "Looked at in relation to the Aramaic section this chapter [Daniel 7] constitutes the climax, and it is the high point in relation to the whole book; subsequent chapters treat only part of the picture and concentrate on some particular aspect of it."¹

But Daniel 7 is as marked by disparity from the previous six chapters as it is by similarity. For one thing, beginning in Daniel 7 and throughout the second half of the book, information is received through angelic mediation rather than through dreams as it had been in Daniel 1-6. The method of reporting also changes, switching from the third to the first person.

¹Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 137.

It is essential and unavoidable to compare chap. 2 with chap. 7. Culver has summarized the comparisons succinctly.

The differences between the dream prophecy of chapter 2 and the vision prophecy of chapter 7 are chiefly as follows: 1) The *dream* was not seen originally by a man of God but by a heathen monarch, hence it was something that would appeal to such a man and which might be readily explicable to his intellect. The *vision* was seen by a holy man of God, and hence in terms more readily explicable to his intellect. 2) The *first* presented the history of nations in their outward aspect—majestic, splendid; the *second* in their inward spiritual aspect—as ravening wild beasts. This might be elaborated to say that the first is a view of the history of nations as man sees them, the second as God sees them.

Since the same general subject is treated in this vision as in the dream of chapter 2 it is natural that the same general principles present in that prophecy should follow here—the same series of powers, the same continuity of rule, degeneration and character of authority, division of sovereignty, and increasing strength of the kingdoms.²

Some have suggested that chap. 2 is the cosmological view (perhaps even the cosmetic view) of the nations whereas chap. 7 provides the spiritual view, which demonstrates the onerous reality of the pagan cosmos.

This study focuses attention on the vision of the four beasts and the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7. This study does not discuss similarities between Daniel 7 and other ancient works³ but seeks to elucidate the text as it is found.

THE VISION OF THE FOUR BEASTS

Dan 7:1–7, 15–17 describes the vision of the four beasts. The question of how to understand the metaphorical phrases such as “the four winds” (7:2) is crucial. The image of “wind” in the book of Daniel seems to be used of God’s sovereign power and therefore suggests a picture of heavenly forces (2:35, 44). Some have suggested that “four” symbolizes the completeness of the whole earth.

This image is used to describe the chaos from which the four beasts arise. It occurs already in Isaiah and Jeremiah where the roar of nations is compared to the roaring of the seas (Isa. 17:12–13; Jer. 6:23). The four winds need not signify more than the totality of the earth, the whole earth, the four corners.⁴

²Robert D. Culver, *Daniel and the Latter Days* (Westwood: Revell, 1954) 126.

³For an article that sees similarities between Daniel 7 and other ancient works see Helge S. Kvanvig, “An Akkadian Vision as Background for Daniel 7?” *ST* 35 (1981) 85–89.

⁴Ziony Zevit, “The Structure and Individual Elements of Daniel 7,” *ZNW*, 80 (1968) 391.

Daniel also sees a "great sea," quite possibly a picture of humanity (cf. Luke 21:25; Matt 13:47; Rev 13:1), suggesting unrest and confusion. The world rages like a sea when it is whipped by the heavenly winds. Daniel relates that four different great beasts come up out of this troubled sea (7:3).

The lion with the eagle's wings (7:4) parallels the gold head of 2:37, 38. The lion signifies strength and the eagle's wings, swiftness. The reference to "heart of man" may point to the individual at the center of the kingdom of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar himself (Jer 49:19-22), or it may refer back to the events of 4:34. Throughout the book of Daniel, God shows Nebuchadnezzar the source of his authority and how his and all other human monarchies fade into insignificance when confronted with the absolute reign of God. Pusey notes, "The intense nothingness and transitoriness of man's might in its highest estate, and so of his, Nebuchadnezzar's own also, and the might of God's kingdom, apart from all human strength, are the chief subjects of this vision, as explained to Nebuchadnezzar."⁵

The second beast "looked like a bear" (7:5). Though bears appear thirteen times in the Bible, the use of the simile here should be correlated with the silver breast of 2:39. It depicts the kingdom of Persia. The size of the animal may be intended to symbolize the size of the Persian armies, which contained as many as two and a half million men (notably in the battles of Xerxes against Greece). The posture ("raised up on one side") is thought by some to indicate a predatory stance—as if the great beast were about ready to pounce. Others suggest that this symbolizes the dominance of Persia in the Medo-Persian Empire. The interpretation of the three ribs in the bear's mouth is also debated. Gaebelien indicates, "The bear had three ribs in its mouth, because Susiana, Lydia and Asia Minor had been conquered by this power."⁶ Leupold generalizes the number.

"Three" appears to be a number that signifies rather substantial conquests and is not to be taken literally. For the Medo-Persian empire conquered more than Babylonia, Lydia, and Egypt. Such enumerations of three definite powers are more or less arbitrary. Three does sometimes signify nothing more than a fairly large number and has no reference to God or the holy Trinity. That is especially true in a case like this. Someone has rightly remarked that "the three ribs constitute a large mouthful."⁷

The third beast "looked like a leopard" (7:6). It had four wings, four heads, and was given authority to rule. Babylon had seized

⁵E. B. Pusey, *Daniel the Prophet* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1885) 118.

⁶Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Prophet Daniel* (New York: Our Hope, 1911) 74.

⁷H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1941) 292.

power from Assyria in 612 B.C. only to lose it to the Medo-Persians in 539 B.C. Then in 336 B.C. Alexander came like a leopard from his lair with his Greek army headed by four generals and known, not for its size like Persia, but for its speed. The leopard should be correlated with the bronze belly and thighs of 2:39.

Most conservative scholars believe that Daniel was written in the sixth century B.C. but other scholars assume that the book is a second century B.C. diatribe against Antiochus Epiphanes. Such scholars usually consider the four kingdoms of Daniel 7 to be Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. Rome is often omitted entirely from the interpretation of the beasts. Hanhart, however, believes that the third beast portrays Rome. He dates Daniel in the second century B.C. and views the dream of Daniel and the vision of Daniel 7 as referring to four contemporary kingdoms, not a succession of sequential kingdoms. Part of his argument is based upon Rev 13:2:

A clue, hidden in Rev. 13:2, namely that the leopard in Dan. 7:6 must represent the Romans and not the Parthians, strengthens an earlier observation that the four beasts in Dan. 7 represent four *contemporaneous* kingdoms existing alongside each other. These two data upset the age old axiom that in Dan. 2:31 ff. and in 7:2 ff. the same empires are intended, for in the order of succeeding kingdoms the Roman empire cannot possibly appear ahead of that of the Hellenes. The introductory phrase, "The four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea," leads me to conclude that the four kingdoms in Dan. 7 are situated around the Mediterranean Sea according to the four points of the compass, to wit: South—Egypt, the lion; East—Persia, the bear; West—Rome, the leopard; North—Syria, the anonymous beast, probably an elephant! (exclamation point mine).⁸

Hanhart's approach is imaginative but has not been widely accepted. It seems clear that the symbolism of Daniel 2, 7, and 8 portrays a succession of four kingdoms.

The final beast is "terrifying and frightening and very powerful" (7:7). It was different from the other beasts in several ways, not the least of which was its ten horns. The iron teeth of 7:7 correspond with the iron legs of 2:33 and the ten horns with the ten toes. Most conservatives identify this beast as Rome.⁹ Rome ruled the world for over 700 years from 336 B.C. to A.D. 407. Even after the sack of Rome there were "Roman" rulers until the time of the Renaissance.

Anderson compares the dream and the vision:

⁸K. Hanhart, "The Four Beasts of Daniel's Vision in the Night in the Light of Rev. 13:2," *NTS* 27 (1981) 580-81.

⁹For a conservative but unconvincing attempt to identify the fourth beast as Greece, see Robert J. M. Gurney, "The Four Kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7" *Themelios* 2 (1977) 39-45.

As the four empires which were destined successively to wield sovereign power during "the times of the Gentiles" are represented in Nebuchadnezzar's dream by the four divisions of the great image, they are here typified by four wild beasts. The ten toes of the image in the second chapter have their correlatives in the ten horns of the fourth beast in the seventh chapter. The character and course of the fourth empire are the prominent subject of the later vision, but both prophecies are equally explicit yet the empire in its ultimate phase will be brought to a signal and sudden end by a manifestation of Divine power on earth.¹⁰

This is certainly a lugubrious scene for the aging Daniel. Jerusalem had been in ruins for more than forty years and Daniel had been in Babylon for close to sixty years. The prophet had seen kings come and go and then God had revealed to him how he would prepare the world for the Messiah's kingdom. The beasts were important in the divine plan. Persia, the second beast, was to send the people of God back to their own land. Greece, the third beast, would spread a culture and a language by which the Gospel would be communicated all over the Mediterranean world. Rome, the fourth beast, would build roads and write laws so that Christ's messengers could carry his Word wherever they were sent.

Before Daniel was able to inquire about any details regarding the terrible beast and the little horn, he saw the Ancient of Days enter the scene (Dan 7:9-10). But before looking at these verses, I will briefly consider the vision of the little horn.

THE VISION OF THE LITTLE HORN

The vision of the little horn is recorded in Dan 7:11-12, 19-25. After all of the beasts had been "stripped of their authority" (7:12), each was "allowed to live for a period of time." Some suggest that this phrase means that each lived out its God-ordained time. Another possibility is that each lived on into the next in the way that Greek culture continued throughout the Roman era. The one exception is the fourth beast which was completely slain, destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. Concerning the fourth beast, its ten horns and particularly the little horn, three questions surface.

What About the Fourth Beast?

I noted above that the fourth beast corresponds to the legs and feet of the image in Daniel 2, and that both are to be equated with the Roman Empire. But the fourth kingdom is different from the others

¹⁰Robert Anderson, *The Coming Prince* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903) 36, 37.

in that it will be revived in some form at the end time. The connection with the future kingdom of Rev 17:12 cannot be overlooked. Culver reminds us, "Nearly all Postmillennialists, Amillennialists, and Pre-millennialists unite in affirming that the Man of Sin of Paul and the Antichrist and first Beast of John are the same as this 'little horn' of Daniel seven."¹¹ The intense cruelty demonstrated by the fourth beast is its primary distinctive; it tramples down and crushes as its wanton cruelty destroys the world.

What About the Ten Horns?

There will be dissension within the fourth beast's kingdom. The eleventh king (the little horn) will subdue three lesser kings. Anderson reminds us that the ascendance of the little horn has not been fulfilled historically and suggests that "the Roman earth shall one day be parceled out in ten separate kingdoms, and out of one there shall arise that terrible enemy of God and His people, whose destruction is to be one of the events of the second advent of Christ."¹²

What About the Little Horn?

Dan 7:20b–25 unfolds the first thorough biblical description of the Antichrist. Daniel 8 may refer to Antiochus Epiphanes, but only the Antichrist can be in view in Daniel 7 (cf. Rev 19:19–21). Daniel was especially interested in this aspect of the fourth beast's kingdom (7:20). At the beginning the little horn will be just another human king (7:8). But then he will become greater than the "horns" before him (7:20) and will be uniquely different from the other horns (7:20, 24), running an absolute dictatorship. Through his keen intelligence (7:8, 20) he will conquer three kings and will boastfully represent himself as the ultimate lawless one (2 Thess 2:9, 10). His ultimate enemy is not any of his contemporary kings but the people of God and, therefore, God himself. Even though the saints of God will be given into his hand, his time is limited—"a time, times and half a time" (7:25). Baldwin well summarizes the main features of the little horn:

Four characteristics of his role are given: i) blasphemy, ii) long-drawn-out persecution (wear *out*, as a garment, implies this), iii) a new table of religious festivals (so suppressing Israel's holy days) and iv) a new morality; the outcome will be the subjugation of God's people. Of these the third and fourth indicate an intention which is not necessarily allowed to be carried out, but the people are given into his *hand*. A

¹¹Culver, *Daniel*, 131.

¹²Anderson, *The Coming Prince*, 40.

greater than he is in control, and whereas this last king thought to change the times, the greater than he has decreed the *time, two times, and half a time*. The expected progression, one, two, three is cut off arbitrarily but decisively.¹³

THE VISION OF THE ANCIENT OF DAYS: THE SON OF MAN AND THE EVERLASTING KINGDOM

The picture of Jehovah as seen by Daniel reminds one of the marvelous worship hymn, "Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise." The imagery of the passage points to holiness, authority, power and worship. The phrase "Ancient of Days" is used only three times in Scripture, all of them in this chapter (7:10, 13, and 22).

It is the name given to the eternal God. Before ever time began, He is the great I AM. He has always had one clear objective which is described as His "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11). He has never deviated from this intention of His and when time is no more, He will still be the I AM, though now with the full realization of that heart purpose of His.¹⁴

One cannot ignore the connection with Rev 5:11. "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders." The open books of 7:10 surely should be connected with the books of Rev 20:12.

Daniel also provides a picture of the Son of Man. Jesus used this phrase of himself twenty-seven times in Luke alone. The image of clouds in v 13 is reminiscent of Sinai (Exod 16:10) and is perhaps the basis for Matt 24:30. Bock points out how the NT development of the term "Son of Man" completes the picture begun by Daniel. He summarizes this NT development in the following nine statements:

1. Jesus progressively revealed His messianic understanding of the term.
2. The messianic significance of the term for Jesus is eventually directly revealed by Jesus *to the disciples* after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi.
3. Jesus fuses the term with other Old Testament descriptions of His mission, specifically the Servant, and thus is able to speak of the Son of Man's necessity to suffer in the suffering sayings which dominate the middle portions of the gospels.
4. As Jesus faces the cross, He begins to reveal to His disciples the background and significance of the term Son of Man in terms of Daniel seven with the apocalyptic sayings.

¹³Baldwin, *Daniel*, 146.

¹⁴Harry Foster, "The Secret of Daniel's Strength," *Toward the Mark 10* (1981) 8.

5. This same background is revealed publicly at His trial before the Sanhedrin.
6. Thus the term is a convenient vehicle for revealing Himself to those who believe, while avoiding *the immediate* political connotations of the term, Messiah.
7. The usage in John's gospel parallels that of the Synoptics while reflecting a development of themes implicit in both the Synoptics and Daniel seven.
8. The term in its Danielic usage in the New Testament has in view His ultimate victory and apocalyptic return, a significant fact in view of His approaching Passion.
9. Therefore, the term is most appropriate for summarizing Christ's Christology, for in it one like a man who is more than a man exercises dominion and authority to such an extent that he can also be considered divine. As such, He will be the center of a new kingdom, king in a new age when all men will recognize His authority and worship His person. God's sovereign plan of history will culminate in the completion of the Son of Man's mission in eternal victory. His future return in vindication makes this certain, even as He heads for the cross. In the promise of His victory, disciples can walk in hope and expectation even though He went to the cross. His rule will cause all men to pause at the marvelous grace of God as it is observed that Jesus the Christ, the Son of Man, is truly the greatest One whoever walked the earth.¹⁵

In Daniel's vision the Son of Man stood in the presence of the Ancient of Days, and "was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (7:14). The basis for NT interpretation of the concept of "kingdom" begins here. The millennium is just the beginning of the eternal kingdom, but in the OT the concept merges into the eternal state. God will ultimately bring together the saints of all the ages who will possess the everlasting kingdom of the Son of Man (7:27).

In the light of Daniel's language and its NT development one wonders about the validity of Zevit's angelic interpretation:

It is the angel Gabriel, representing saints of the Most High, who receives dominion, glory and kingship—basic elements of God's kingdom. The interpretation of the vision makes it quite clear that it is the saints who will receive the kingdom. The author did not dwell on the angelic figure because he took him for granted. Gabriel and a number of other heavenly beings continued to function throughout the book

¹⁵Darrell L. Bock, "The Son of Man in Daniel and the Messiah" (unpublished Th.M. thesis; Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979) 97-100.

because the major concern of the author was not with the celestial, but with the terrestrial.¹⁶

One need not belittle the importance of angels in rejecting such an inadequate approach, especially in view of Hebrews 1.

CONCLUSION

Those who study and teach prophecy are sometimes justly accused of having no concern for the present. Yet this chapter of deep eschatological significance also contains a number of lessons for the present hour.

This vision reminds believers that the control of the world belongs to God (cf. Dan 4:17; 5:20). The world may deny him, curse him, laugh at him, or ignore him as various kingdoms rise and fall. But when the throne of the Ancient of Days is set in place, every knee shall bow. The Son of Man and his saints will then prevail. The Son of Man is not a mere collective personification for the saints. As Boutflower explains,

... "The saints" belong to the vision, and not merely to its interpretation. They have already appeared in the vision as a persecuted people. It is, therefore, most unlikely that in its further development they should be represented in symbol by a single individual. But in as much as the kingdom given to "One like unto a Son of Man" is seen to be given also to "the saints," we are forced to conclude that the mysterious person thus described is the God-appointed head of the saints.¹⁷

Daniel 7 also reminds believers that Satan is indeed the prince of this world (cf. John 12:31; 14:30; Eph 2:2). Such an awareness, however, should not lead to monasticism. Daniel is a great historic example of a godly leader in a pagan society. To be sure, believers are pilgrims and strangers in the world but that status should not lead to a total withdrawal from existing society.

The passage also suggests that believers' lives should reflect their eschatology (7:15, 28). Peter makes the point succinctly when he asks, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (1 Pet 3:11). Then he answers his own question by saying, "You want to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (3:11b-12a).

¹⁶Zevit, "Daniel 7," 396.

¹⁷Charles Boutflower, *In and Around the Book of Daniel* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977) 59.

It is imperative that with bowed hearts all of God's people recognize that the ultimate glory belongs to him alone (Rev 11:15, 33-36).

Careless seems the great Avenger, history's pages but record
One death-grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and Thy Word.
Truth forever on the scaffold; wrong forever on the throne! Yet that
Scaffold sways the future, and beyond the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows, keeping watch above His own.¹⁸

¹⁸Quoted by Robert D. Culver (unpublished class notes; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, September, 1972).