



Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Chapter 7: The Four Beasts and The Ancient of Days

Chapters 1 through 6 describe the life and various events that involved Daniel and his companions Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego) after their capture from Judah and service in Babylon. Chapters 7 through 12 describe visions Daniel had. As we'll see, certain of these visions occurred during the times described in the first 6 chapters.

7:1-8, The Vision of the Four Beasts

In the first year of Belshazzar: We first heard about Belshazzar in Chapter 5. Timing-wise, then, this vision was given to Daniel after the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, but before the Babylonian Empire was conquered by Darius of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Daniel had a dream and visions: This first vision, one of four described between Daniel 7 – 12, was the most comprehensive. The other three visions go into details within the general framework of this first vision.

Telling the main facts: How often do we encounter this in scripture? Daniel could have given us more detail, but the Holy Spirit only wanted him to write the main facts. Why? Well, we can only speculate, but it's probably a pretty good speculation that God chooses to reveal only that which is beneficial for His people.

Stirring up the Great Sea: Each of the empires mentioned in this vision had a geographical connection to the Mediterranean Sea, so it's reasonable to think that references to "the Great Sea" are referring to it. The Mediterranean was a vastly different body of water than the Sea of Galilea and other smaller "seas" referred to in scripture. This was a sea known to swallow large ships, and to be the only known route to distant lands. A vision of this sea being stirred up carries the idea of

frightening chaos and trouble. The sea is also used from time to time to refer to Gentile nations (Psalm 74:13, Psalm 89:9, Isaiah 57:20).

The four winds of heaven: Some scholars see these winds as a description of the power of God striving with men (Psalm 35:5, Psalm 48:7, Psalm 107:25, Isaiah 27:8 and Isaiah 41:16). Others suggest these four winds were satanic forces, as pictured in Revelation 7:1.

And four great beasts came up from the sea: Four large, ferocious animals emerged from the Great Sea (Mediterranean), each one distinct from the other. Several verses later Daniel will tell us that these four beasts are four kingdoms ruling over the earth.

The first was like a lion: The first beast was more majestic than any of the following beasts. Lions and eagles are used to picture the “kings” of their realms. In fact, Jeremiah used both the lion and the eagle as pictures of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 49:19-22). But this majestic beast was humbled (its wings were plucked off) and made human (in that a man’s heart was given to it).

A second, like a bear: The second beast didn’t have the majestic bearing of either the lion or the eagle. A bear is slower, stronger, and more crushing than a lion – and this bear had a voracious appetite for conquest (Arise, devour much flesh!).

The bear represents the Medo-Persian Empire, succeeding the Babylonian Empire. In this partnership between the Medes and the Persians, the Persians were dominant.

Arise, devour much flesh: The armies of the Medo-Persian empire were renowned for overwhelming their opponents with superior size and strength. Many commentators think the three ribs in this beast’s teeth represent three great military conquests: Babylon, Egypt and Lydia.

Some commentators identify the bear with only the Median state, rather than the combined Medo-Persian Empire. They assign the third beast to the Persian Empire, and the fourth to Alexander’s Greek Empire. But the Medes alone never held an equal ranking, or even close to it, compared to the Medo-Persian Empire.

Another, like a leopard: The leopard is known for sudden, unexpected attacks. This beast had the added advantage of speed (four wings). This matches well with the Greek Empire. Alexander the Great effectively conquered the civilized world within about 12 years, and by age 28! After Alexander’s death the empire was divided into four parts, perhaps corresponding to the four heads, predicting Casander, Lysimachus, Seleucus, and Ptolemy, who assumed control of Alexander’s realm after his death.

The Babylonian Empire dominated in Daniel's day. One might have guessed – especially during the uneasy reign of Belshazzar – that the next empire would be the Medo-Persian Empire. But Daniel could not know that the next great empire would be the Empire of Alexander the Great, being like a leopard in its rise and prominence, and that it would ultimately be divided into four parts.

A fourth beast, dreadful and terrible: The fourth beast was somewhat indescribable, and uniquely horrific in its power and conquest.

Different... it had ten horns: In the ancient world horns expressed the power and fearsomeness of an animal. This fourth beast was so strong it had ten horns.

The fourth beast seems to represent the Roman Empire, which was the largest, strongest, most unified and enduring empire of all those predicted, lasting over half a century. The history of Roman Emperors is far too long to recount here, however, the primary significance of the picture of a "horn" is power, and the ten horns may be foretelling as the magistracies of the Republic of Rome. Depending on how and who you count, the actual number may be less than or more than ten, but the point here is not to enumerate future history. Certainly the successive imperial powers of Rome collectively had a mouth "speaking great (pompous) things."

Other kings and monarchs had claimed to be the sons of their gods; but Roman emperors were addressed as *divus* (God) *during their lifetime*. And there's no question the Roman empire "made war against the saints" (the people of God.) Nero decreed war against the Jews and persecuted Christians; Vespasian began the conquest of Jerusalem, and Titus finished off the capture and destruction of Jerusalem; Domitian was bad enough that many considered him the reincarnation of Nero!

The description of the first beast in Revelation 13:5-6 could be describing the Roman Empire (and perhaps similar ones to follow!):

And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

Commentators vary on the distinction between the fourth beast and the horn, as some believe that the horn, as well as the beast of Revelation 13 is the "final" antichrist, others think it is his government or administration, and still others (like Lutherans!) see

the cyclical pattern of corrupt governments and human systems with human voices in scripture without need for further embellishment. This type of “man” can represent and even personify an entire government or system. For example, when we think of Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, the figures of Adolph Hitler as an individual and Nazi Germany as a state are similar or the same because of the atrocities committed by both.

7:9-12, The Ancient of Days

...Thrones were placed (established): In Revelation 4 when the Apostle John saw heaven, he saw thrones, but he also saw those who sat on those thrones – the 24 elders described in Revelation 4:4. Daniel makes no mention of the elders, probably because the 24 elders represent the church, and the church was an unrevealed mystery to Old Testament saints (Ephesians 3:1-7).

And the Ancient of Days took his seated... flames... fire: The Ancient of Days is a picture of God, with flames and fire used to picture His righteous judgement.

Isaiah 66:15-16 describes the judgment of God in terms of fire:

“For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many.”

The court was seated, and the books were opened: The Bible describes several books before God:

- The book of the living (Psalm 69:28)
- The book of remembrance (Malachi 3:16)
- The Book of Life (Philippians 4:3, Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27 and 22:19).

They had their dominion taken away: Here we witness the transition from human to Divine dominion on Earth. The Son of Man succeeds the reign of the fourth beast.

I watched till the beast was slain... the rest of the beasts, they had their dominion taken away: When Jesus is crucified and resurrected, the empires of the world and the many antichrists that go with it were rendered impotent in comparison with the Gospel of the Kingdom, even those will continue to exist in worldly form.

7:13-14, The Son of Man

One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven: The title Son of Man was a Jesus' favorite self-designation, occurring more than 80 times in the four Gospels. He receives all dominion previously held by the beasts, and His reign is permanent.

7:15-28, Interpretation of the Vision

...My spirit within me was anxious: Daniel saw all this, but did not really understand all that he saw. So naturally, he was troubled by his lack of understanding of the vision.

Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings which arise out of the earth: The divine interpretation of the dream shows that this vision covers the same material as Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel 2, which also described the rise of four empires, which are succeeded by the kingdom of God.

But Daniel's vision was different because of its perspective; here he is seeing the kingdoms from God's perspective. Nebuchadnezzar saw the present and future world empires in the form of a stately and noble statue of a man. But here God shows how He regarded them, like ferocious and wild animals who devour and conquer, and without conscience.

The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom: The saints received the kingdom with the (first!) coming of Jesus, and will "gain dominion" over all at His second coming.

I wished to know the truth about the fourth beast: Although there is much of interest about all these four beasts, Daniel is especially interested in the fourth one, the most terrible beast, and especially about its conspicuous little horn.

The ten horns are ten kings who shall arise from this kingdom: As mentioned previously, what's indicated here isn't so much about 10 specific magistracies or emperors of Rome, but rather the long, ongoing succession of them (in contrast to the other empires described in the vision.) And collectively, they made war upon God's saints and "spoke great (pompous) words against the Most High." As have many governments, systems, tyrants, dictators, and empires since.

Commentator Lehman Strauss:

"The Bible predicts no peace-loving world ruler for the last days. We can expect nothing more than greedy commercialism and political imperialism under the most beastly and barbaric type of warfare."

He... shall think to change the times and the law.: This is an expression of great power, though some interpret it differently. For example, Seventh-Day Adventist doctrine takes this passage very literally, and holds that the Roman Papacy “changed the times and law” by moving the Lord’s day from Saturday to Sunday. Even today some Seventh-Day Adventists therefore regard worship on Sunday as the sign of, or even worship of, the Antichrist!

...And they shall be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.: We see here that there are multiple time tables at play. We can take comfort that God knows and controls them all. Whether a “time” is a month, a year, or a millennium, God has already placed limits on all these enemies of His Kingdom.

Then the kingdom and dominion...shall be given to... the saints of the Most High: Dispensational pre-millennialism trips up on this, thinking it must describe the “millennial” world, not the time since Jesus’ resurrection and Ascension, or Judgement Day, or even heaven. They argue that the kingdom and dominion of the earth does not *appear* to belong to the righteous now, so it must refer to a time when Jesus literally reigns on Earth. That point of view understands “the kingdom and dominion” in only earthly terms. Instead, we can just take these words at face value.

My thoughts greatly troubled me: This is understandable when we think of Daniel’s character from the testimony of this book. The ferocity of the attack(s) to come against his people, the seeming dominance of God’s enemies for such a long time, etc.

...But I kept the matter in my heart.: Although troubling, Daniel was also convinced that this prophecy from God was the word of God, and therefore true. Therefore he would continue to think about this and what it means.