



The Book of Daniel

Daniel 7

Daniel 7 is a pivotal chapter in the book, linked to the preceding chapters by the Aramaic language and to what follows by content and genre. It is presented as a dream, but Daniel rather than the king is now the dreamer.

Mythic Allusions

The four winds of heaven are whipping up the great sea. The sea here is not just the Mediterranean, but the primeval sea. Four great beasts come up out of it. The symbolism evokes a mythic tradition that reaches back to the Canaanite myths of the second millennium, before the emergence of Israel, where the Sea, Yamm, is the rival of the god Baal, and the sea monster is called Lotan (= biblical Leviathan). In this myth, Yamm challenges Baal for the kingship, but Baal splits him with a club. (In another cycle of the myth, the adversary is Mot, or Death, who is more formidable. Death swallows Baal for a time, until he is rescued by his sister Anath). This myth was adapted in Israel, and is often reflected in the Hebrew Bible, especially in poetic passages (e.g. Job 26:12-13; Psalm 89:9-11). Sometimes the Bible looks back to the role of the Sea in the drama of creation. Yahweh is said to have "cut Rahab in pieces," "pierced the dragon" and "dried up the sea" in Isa 51:9-11. (Drying up the sea is also an allusion to the story of the Exodus). In other passages, the victory over the sea and its monsters is still expected in the future. So Isaiah 27:1: "On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea." The vision of beasts rising from the sea suggests that creation is coming undone, that anarchy is loosed upon the world.

In Daniel 7, four beasts rise from the sea, to symbolize the four kingdoms, which we have already met in Daniel 2. They are hybrid creatures, which embody features of different animals or birds. The first is like a lion, but has eagles' wings. The second looks like a bear, the third like a leopard. Such hybrid creatures are often found in ancient Near Eastern art. The choice of these particular beasts in Daniel 7 may be influenced by Hosea 13:7-8: "so I will become a lion to them, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way, I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs." The fourth beast has no parallel in Hosea, and is the most terrible. It had great iron teeth and was devouring and breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. The

stamping suggests that the animal is an elephant. Elephants were used in warfare in the Hellenistic age, to inspire terror in opponents. The beast had ten horns, suggested, perhaps by the fact that elephants were sometimes depicted with crowns on Hellenistic coins. Then a little horn sprouts up in addition. This horn will be the focus of attention in the interpretation that follows.

Then the scene shifts to heaven. Thrones are set, and an “Ancient of Days” appears, with hair white as wool. A stream of fire flows out before him, and he has an entourage of tens of thousands. The beasts are subjected to judgment. The fourth beast is condemned to death by fire, while the others are deprived of their kingdoms.

Then another heavenly figure appears: one “like a son of man,” which is to say, like a human being, who appears with the clouds of heaven. He is presented before the Ancient One, and he is given dominion, glory and kingship, that will last forever.

This imagery too has ancient mythic overtones. The Ancient of Days is obviously God. The depiction as a white-headed figure hearkens back to portrayals of the Canaanite high god, El. El was identified with Yahweh already in Genesis, and the name is the common word for God in the Hebrew Bible. There are some indications in the Hebrew Bible that El or Elyon (the Most High) was once distinguished from Yahweh. In Deut 32:8-9, Elyon allots the nations to the various gods and allots Israel to Yahweh. In most of the Hebrew Bible, however, El, Elyon, and Yahweh are one and the same.

Riding on the clouds is also an attribute of a divine figure. In the Canaanite myths, Baal is the rider of the clouds. In the Hebrew Bible, apart from Daniel 7, the figure riding on the clouds is always Yahweh. Yet in Daniel 7, this figure is clearly distinct from, and subordinate to, the Ancient of Days. The imagery of an older god bestowing kingship on a younger one is not problematic in the context of Canaanite religion but is exceptional in the religion of Israel. Canaanite traditions were still passed on in the Hellenistic age. It may be significant that the new cult introduced into Jerusalem by the soldiers of Antiochus Epiphanes was that of Baal Shamen, Baal of the heavens. As we shall see, however, the imagery is interpreted differently in Daniel.

Interpretation

Daniel is understandably perplexed by the vision. He approaches an angel (“one of those standing there”) and asks for an explanation. The answer is scarcely less confusing than the vision: “As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever and ever.”

Daniel asks for further clarification, especially about the fourth beast and the little upstart horn. This horn, we are told, made war on the holy ones and was prevailing against them until the Ancient One came and gave the kingdom to the Holy Ones. The fourth beast represents a fourth kingdom, which is different from all the others. Its ten horns are ten kings, and the little horn is different from all that precede him. Not only does he displace some of the previous

kings, but he speaks words against the Most High, “wears out” the Holy Ones of the Most High, and attempts to change the sacred seasons and the law. He succeeds for “a time, two times, and half a time,” before his dominion is taken away.

It is clear that the fourth kingdom is that of the Greeks. This is clear already by analogy with chapter 2, but also from the succession of kings throughout the book. The little horn is Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Epiphanes was not the eldest son of Antiochus III. That was Epiphanes’ older brother, Seleucus IV, who was assassinated by Heliodorus (famous for his unsuccessful attempt to seize funds from the Jerusalem temple, in 2 Maccabees, chapter 3). Antiochus ousted Heliodorus. The son of Seleucus, Demetrius, who was the legitimate heir, was a hostage in Rome, so Epiphanes seized power with the help of King Eumenes II of Pergamum. Seleucus, Heliodorus and Demetrius were presumably the three horns that were uprooted by the little horn.

Epiphanes suspended the right of the people of Judea to live in accordance with their ancestral law, and to celebrate their traditional festivals. This is what is meant by the statement that he sought to change the times (=the cultic calendar) and the law. People were forbidden to circumcise their children and were forced to participate in pagan festivals. According to 2 Maccabees, they were forced to walk in processions honoring Dionysus, and to celebrate the king’s birthday. A pagan-style Syrian altar was superimposed on the altar of the Jerusalem temple. This became known as the abomination that makes desolate, or the abomination of desolation. This corruption of the cult was regarded as equivalent to making war against the host of heaven.

The Holy Ones of the Most High

For a long time, interpreters assumed that the holy ones (or saints) of the Most High were the Jewish people. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, it has been clear that holy ones normally refer to the heavenly host, or angels. When human beings are called holy ones or saints, even in the New Testament, it is because they are assimilated to the heavenly holy ones. Elsewhere in Daniel, holy ones are clearly angels. The angel who pronounces judgment on Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 is “a watcher, a holy one.” In Dan 8:13 Daniel hears two holy ones speaking to each other. Some scholars object that Epiphanes could not “wear out” the holy ones if they were angels, but in chapter 8 we will find that he casts some of the stars to the ground and tramples on them. The point is that he succeeds for a time in his assault on the heavenly host. It is true, of course, that the empirical basis for these statements lies in Epiphanes’s suppression of the Jewish law and cult, but the point of Daniel 7 is that his actions transcend ordinary human affairs. In suppressing the cult, he is making an assault on heaven. To explain his actions only in human terms is to miss their significance. There is more at stake in Daniel 7 than human interaction.

The debate about the “one like a son of man” involves similar issues. Some scholars think this figure is a collective symbol for Israel or the Jewish people, but this, again, misses the mythological or spiritual dimension of the vision. The kingdom is “given” by God three times,

once to the “one like a son of man,” once to the holy ones, and finally to the people of the holy ones. These three are obviously related, but they are not necessarily identical. The “one like a son of man” represents the holy ones as their leader. Later in the book, this role is attributed to the archangel Michael, and most probably Michael is intended in Daniel 7 too. Other Jewish texts from antiquity, such as the Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra 13, and also the New Testament, interpret the one like a son of man as an individual figure. He is more than an angel. He takes on many of the characteristics traditionally attributed to Yahweh. In the New Testament, he is interpreted as Christ, and in the Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra 13 he is a messiah. But he is not a messiah in the traditional sense of a human king who would restore the Davidic dynasty. The Book of Daniel has no place for messianism in this sense. The one like a son of man is a heavenly, angelic figure, who does much of what a messiah was traditionally expected to do, insofar as he receives the kingdom on behalf of the holy ones. He also receives it on behalf of the people of the holy ones, or the Jewish people. The kingdom is realized on three levels: in the heavenly enthronement of the one like a son of man, in the rule of the angelic holy ones, and in the rule of the Jewish people on earth.

Daniel 7 was written to assure the Jews who were being persecuted by Antiochus Epiphanes that they were not alone in their struggle. They had powerful allies in heaven, and eventually God would judge their enemies in their behalf. This message will be reiterated in the remaining chapters of Daniel. When the chapter is interpreted as speaking only of the Jewish people, this message is missed. Equally, if the beasts of the sea are interpreted as being merely earthly kingdoms, their significance is missed. For Daniel, creation was coming undone, and could only be set right by divine intervention.

The duration of the persecution is specified as a times, times and half a time, or three and a half years. We will find variations on that number in the later chapters of Daniel.

The lasting significance of the chapter chiefly lies in the image of the one like a son of man coming on the clouds of heaven. This image affirmed the possibility of deliverance by heavenly means. In time, it would be taken to imply a new kind of messiah, or savior figure, one who was not of human origin. For the followers of Jesus, this text would make it possible to affirm that Jesus was the messiah, even though he had not driven the Romans from Jerusalem and had died an ignominious death. He could still be affirmed as a different kind of messiah, in conformity with Daniel’s prophecy.

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