

When Nightmares Cease:

A Message of Hope from Daniel 7

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Introduction

What is the worst nightmare you have ever had? I shall never forget two nightmares that seemed to recur regularly when I was young, especially when I was sick. The first involved images of worms all over my bed crawling over me and eating at my flesh (It sounds like the television reality show, “The Fear Factor”). The second had no action at all; it simply involved a huge eye fixed in the ceiling gazing down at me. Undoubtedly one of the reasons these images have been permanently etched in my mind is because of the effect they had on me. Indeed, the description of Daniel’s response at the end of the vision recorded in Daniel 7 describes precisely how I felt (even the name is right): “As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart.”

The Nature of Daniel 7

Although scholars generally consider Daniel 7 to be the first formally apocalyptic text of the book and therefore link it with the visions that follow, technically this chapter belongs with the preceding, for several reasons. First, like the preceding chapters, beginning at Daniel 2:4b, it is composed in Aramaic, the language of commerce and administration in the Babylonian empire. Second, although most of the chapter involves Daniel’s own description of a night vision cast in the first person, like the preceding accounts, technically this chapter is cast as third person narrative style, with an extended embedded first person vision account. Third, Daniel’s dream in this chapter exhibits obvious links with Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2, especially the sequential presentation and the periodization of history in four eras. However, the characterization of the four kingdoms is quite different. Whereas the colossus in chapter 2 represents earthly kingdoms from the human perspective as fundamentally noble achievements, the four beasts in chapter 7 represent them from the divine perspective, characterizing human political achievements as ruthless and brutal monstrosities.

The genre of Daniel’s experience is identified in verse 1 as “a dream that he saw and visions of his head as he lay on his bed” (*hēlem ḥāzâ wēḥezwê rē’sēh ‘al*

miškēbēh), and then committed to writing in summary form (*ḥēlmā 'kētab rē šēh 'al miškēbēh*). As in most dreams, particularly nightmares, here Daniel's eyes are fixed on the series of scenes that transpire in front of him. How fixed is his attention to the images is highlighted by the ninefold repetition of "I kept looking" (*ḥāzēh ḥāwēt*, vv. 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11a, 11b, 13, 21), the fivefold repetition of "and behold" (*wa 'ārū*, vv. 2, 5, 6, 7, 13), and two occurrences of "and behold" (*wa 'ālū*,) in verse 8. (Cf. also "I was contemplating" [*mištakkal ḥāwēt*] in v. 8).

The chapter is cast in an ABAB structure, with descriptions of images alternating with interpretations of the images. Daniel's account begins with a lengthy report of a series of bizarre images (vv. 2-14), followed by an interpretation of these images (vv. 15-20), a flashback of an unreported detail of the vision (vv. 21-22), and concluding with further interpretation (vv. 23-27). The images he sees in A (vv. 2-14) are strange, centering around four land animals that emerge from the sea, an obvious expression of chaos, contravening the order of creation as described in Genesis 1. Each of the animals he sees is weird. The *lion* had the wings of an eagle, and stood erect on two legs like a man. Indeed it was given the mind of a man. The second *bearlike* creature was asymmetrical, being raised on one side, and having three ribs apparently as permanent fixtures between its teeth. The third resembled a *leopard*, except that it had two pairs of wings on its back and four heads. The fourth beast was *nondescript*. Daniel could produce no analogue from the animal world, so he highlights its vicious and terrorizing character. The animal was exceptional because it had ten horns, but then an eleventh little horn appears, which supplants three of the original ten. Daniel is mesmerized by this little horn, which has human eyes and a mouth that would not stop boasting. Later (vv. 21-22), he reports that the little horn waged war against the saints of the Most High.

As in the prologue to the book of Job, in verses 9-14, Daniel's gaze shifts from the earth and the rulers of the earth, to the heavens, where he sees God portrayed as the Ancient of Days (*'attiq yômîm*). Borrowing a leaf out of Ezekiel's notebook, this figure sits on a fiery throne supported by burning wheels, and surrounded by an innumerable host of heavenly attendants. In verses 11-12 Daniel's gaze returns to earth, where he sees the nondescript beast slain, and the power removed from the rest of the creatures, undoubtedly the result of the decision of the heavenly court in verse 10. In verses 13-14, the attention returns to heaven where one like the son of man (*bar 'ēnāš*) is presented to the Ancient of Days and is authorized to rule the earth eternally and universally.

The B section consists of a narrative description of Daniel's response and the interpretation of the vision so far. Not surprisingly, Daniel was emotionally disturbed over the vision. It is evident from his response that he was more impressed by the earthly scenes of the vision than by the heavenly. This is confirmed by his reaction to the heavenly interpreter's explanation. The interpreter deals with the monsters only long enough to note that they represent four earthly kings and then comments on the significance of the heavenly scene: The kingdom is delivered into the hands of the saints of the Most High

(*'elyônîn*). However, Daniel is preoccupied with the animals, especially the ominous fourth beast, so he asks for an exact interpretation of the ten horns and the boastful little horn (v. 19-20).

In A' (vv. 21-22) Daniel recounts an additional detail of the vision: He saw the little horn wage war on the saints, with apparent success, until the Ancient of Days intervened and pronounced the outcome of the crisis in favor of the saints.

The account concludes with B' (vv. 23-27)-additional interpretive comments on the vision, elaborating on the sketchy picture the interpreter had provided in verses 17-18. This paragraph highlights the arrogance of the little horn, the significance of the decision rendered in the heavenly court, the guaranteed triumph of the saints, and the eternity and universality of the rule of the Most High. Daniel's concluding comment about his mental and emotional state (v. 28) indicates that he had not been totally reassured by the vision.

The Theological and Practical Significance of Daniel 7

Daniel's reaction to the vision offers me some comfort. If the original recipient of the vision did not get the point, even though he had the benefit of the heavenly interpreter, I should not feel too badly if there are elements here that I do not understand. I just wish the interpreter would return and explain to me the significance of this text. What is there here that we who are gathered here need to take home with us? We may answer this question from several angles.

First, this passage declares the sovereignty of God over the affairs of the nations. This is implicit in the large number of divine passives found in the descriptions of the animals: the lion's wings were plucked, it was lifted up, it was made to stand like a man, a human mind was given to it (v. 4); the bear was raised on one side, it was ordered to devour much meat (v. 5); the leopard had dominion given to it (v. 6); the monster had three of its horns pulled out by the roots (v. 8), it was slain, destroyed, and given to the burning fire (v. 11). Verse 12 expresses it all: The dominion of the beasts was taken away, though an extension of life was granted them for an appointed period of time. The sovereignty of God is expressed explicitly through the prominence given to the Ancient of Days and the role of the divine court. In the context of the court, eternal and universal dominion is handed to the Son of Man (vv. 13-14); the critical moment occurs when the Ancient of Days renders judgment in favor of the saints (v. 22), taking the dominion from the beasts and handing it over to them (vv. 26-27). This is Daniel's way of declaring the truth expressed by Isaiah in 40:23-24:

He brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows on them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

Or Psalm 2:1-6

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?
 The kings of the earth set themselves,
 and the rulers take counsel together,
 against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
 "Let us burst their bonds apart
 and cast away their cords from us."
 He who sits in the heavens laughs;
 the Lord holds them in derision.
 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
 and terrify them in his fury, saying,
 "As for me, I have set my King
 on Zion, my holy hill."

For Daniel and his people, this should have been a source of great encouragement. Nebuchadnezzar and his successors rule only by the divine will, and when God decides their time is up, it is up. He delivers the authority into the hands of someone else.

My friends, in 2005, nothing has changed. In their arrogance, rulers of our own day may view themselves as supreme expressions of human nobility, but they rule only by the decree of God. Within the past two decades, we have witnessed the demise of the mighty Soviet empire. It seems to have fallen without human hands. Closer to home, this passage serves as a warning to all who exercise political power that they rule only by the will of God. There is no place for triumphalism in our own political context, for the Lord is able to bring down the arrogant with a mere sneeze. When our leaders impose their wills on other nations—even if it is on our behalf and in defense of our cherished values, as if these somehow represent the values of the kingdom of God—they run the danger of provoking the wrath of God.

Second, and more specifically, this text proclaims the fidelity of Yahweh to his covenant people. If we examine this vision from the perspective of Daniel's own historical context, it offers great hope and comfort to the people of Israel. No doubt Daniel and his countrymen were wondering what had happened to the promises of God. God had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an eternal possession (Gen 17:8). At Sinai, God had entered into covenant relationship with Israel from which there was to be no divorce (Ex. 31:16). God had promised David and his descendants the eternal title to the throne of Israel (2 Sam. 7). God had chosen Zion as the site of his eternal earthly residence (Ps. 132:13-15). All of these promises are jeopardized by the nation's exile. The primary point of the vision is to reassure the people that the evil empires will not prevail; the saints of the Most High, a euphemism for the Jews, will ultimately be vindicated and exercise dominion over the earth with the Most High himself.

If this was the primary significance of the vision for Daniel and his own generation, what about its significance for us? How does it speak to the present context? What word do we find here for the church at the beginning of the

twenty first century? It is a glorious word indeed. Although the expression, “people of the saints of the Most High” has primary reference to the Jews, I am delighted by the choice of words. By using the term *qaddīšīn*, “saints,” rather than *jehudāyin*, “Jews,” as the narrator had in 3:8, 12 the divine interpreter invites all who have been consecrated by God for divine service to find hope in these verses. This is the hope celebrated by the psalmist in Psalm 31:23:

Love the LORD, all you his saints!
The Lord preserves the faithful
but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride.

Or Psalm 37:28

For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his saints.
They are preserved forever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

Or Psalm 97:10

O you who love the LORD, hate evil!
He preserves the lives of his saints;

he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

This is the hope of New Testament believers celebrated by the twenty-four elders before the heavenly throne in Revelation 11:16-18:

And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying,

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.

The nations raged, but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants,

the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

This is the hope of Christians under pressure from brutal authorities around the world today. Two weeks ago I returned from China, where I spent one of the most memorable weeks of my life. I had the rare privilege of living with fifty leaders of the house-church movement for one week. During the day, we studied the gospel according to Moses in Deuteronomy and the gospel according to Paul in the epistle to the Romans (the latter led by Grant Osborne). In the evenings, we listened to the stories of these brave people who had survived Mao’s cultural revolution and to this day are in constant threat of incarceration and torture, simply because they are Christians. What a delight it was to hear these people pray. Never in my life have I witnessed such devotion, such passion, such gratitude for God’s favor, and such confidence in the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God and the vindication of his saints.

Third, this text proclaims the ultimate victory of the Messiah. I am aware that to interpret the Son of Man messianically has fallen out of fashion among scholars, even some evangelical interpreters (Goldingay, Lucas). It is true that this account refers to the figure only in the vaguest of terms (Son of Man, Most High), and that the Old Testament nowhere links these epithets directly with the Davidic Messiah. However, the image of the Ancient of Days handing over authority to the Son of Man is reminiscent of Psalm 2, where Yāhweh answers the rebellion of the nations by handing authority over them to his adopted Son, the Davidic king. This interpretation is reinforced by the use of singular pronouns in verse 27 (contra NRSV, ESV), and confirmed by the New Testament, particularly “little apocalypses” of the Gospels,

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31; cf. Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27).

Compare also Revelation 1:4-7, where in his prayer for the seven churches in Asia John declares:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

In Revelation 1:13 Jesus Christ is expressly identified as “the Son of Man.” Through his identification with us our triumph is secured. Just as in the ancient world the fate of a people was tied up with the fate of their king, who represented and embodied the nation, so the ultimate fate of God’s people is linked with the fate of the Son of Man. When authority is handed over to him, the authority is also guaranteed for his people.

Whatever other effect this conference has on us, above all may the study of the apocalyptic literature inspire us all to greater confidence in the ultimate triumph of God, his Messiah, and his people. May we rejoice in the knowledge that one day we will be among those gathered around the throne who will sing (Horatius Bonar):

Blessing and honor and glory and power,
 Wisdom and riches and strength evermore
 Give ye to Him Who our battle has won
 Whose are the kingdom, the crown, and the throne.

Into the heav'n of the heav'ns has He gone,
Sits He now in the joy of the throne,
Wears He now of the kingdom the crown,
Sings He now the new song with His own.
Sounds the Heaven of the heavens with His Name;
Rings the earth with His glory and fame;
Ocean and mountain, stream, forest, and flower
Echo His praises and tell of His power.
Past are the darkness, the storm, and the war,
Come is the radiance, that sparkles afar,
Breaks the gleam of the day without end,
Rises the Sun that shall never descend.
Ever ascends the song and the joy;
Ever descends the love from on high;
Blessing and honor and glory and praise,
This is the theme of the hymns that we raise.
Life of all life, and true Light of all light,
Star of the dawning unchangingly bright,
Sun of the Salem whose light is the Lamb,
Theme of the ever new, ever glad psalm!
Give we the glory and praise to the Lamb;
Take we the robe and the harp and the palm;
Sing we the song of the Lamb that was slain,
Dying in weakness, but rising to reign.