

**8. FOUR BEASTS FROM THE SEA
& A HUMAN FIGURE IN HEAVEN**

DANIEL 7:1-28

¹In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream:

²In my vision at night, I saw, and behold, the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, ³and four immense beasts came up out of the sea, each different from the others.

⁴The first was like a lion but with eagle wings. In its mouth it had three tusks, and it was given the command: "Up, devour much flesh!" Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and removed from the earth.

⁵Then I saw another beast, a second one, that looked like a bear. It stood erect on two feet, like a man; and it was given the heart of a man.

⁶After this, as I looked on, there was another one, which was like a leopard, but with bird wings on its back. This beast had four heads; and dominion was given to it.

This is the first of the 'visions' that make up the second section of the Book of Daniel. It is composed in Aramaic, like the stories of the first section (2:4 - 6:29). There are clear connections with the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the first of the stories in chapter 2, and it functions as an appendix to these stories, focusing on the situation in the early years of the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (see page 88).

The 'great sea' [ܢܗܪܐ ܢܗܪܐ, verse 2] is the primeval element of chaos of the Babylonian creation story (the *Enūma eliš*), the Ugarit myths of Ras Shamra, and, generally, of Ancient Near Eastern mythology. Other Biblical texts draw on this common mythic background (see Genesis 1:2; Job 26:12-13; Psalm 89:9-11; Isaiah 51:9-10; Isaiah 17:12-14).

The 'four immense beasts' come up out of this primeval chaos. Other Biblical texts speak of monsters from the sea representing kingdoms that are hostile to God (see Isaiah 27:1; 30:7; Ezekiel 29; 32; Psalm 68:31; 74:13; 87:4). Here the four beasts replace the metals of chapter 2, and they represent the same four empires: Babylon, Media, Persia, and the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great.

The 'three tusks' (verse 4) of the first beast (the lion) may represent the three kings of the Babylonian Empire known to the author: Nebuchadnezzar (see Daniel chapters 1-5 throughout), Evil-merodach (see 2Kings 25:27; Jeremiah 52:13), and Belshazzar (see Daniel chapter 5 throughout; 7:1; 8:1).

The second beast, the bear with the heart of a man, represents the Medes whom, according to Jeremiah (51:28), God would use to punish the sacrilegious Babylonians.

The 'four heads' (verse 6) of the third beast (the leopard) represent the four Persian kings known to the author: Cyrus (see Ezra 1:1), Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6), Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7) and Darius (Nehemiah 12:22).

Lion, bear and leopard are mentioned in Hosea 13:7-8 in the context of a divine threat. There are many examples of hybrid animals in Near Eastern art and literature.

The 'ten horns' (verse 7) of the fourth beast represent the ten kings of the Seleucid dynasty (see verse 24) from Alexander to Seleucus IV.

The extra horn that sprouts and replaces three of the ten horns (verse 8) represents Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the ruler responsible for the horrific persecution which the author and his contemporaries were experiencing. The 'three previous horns' may refer to the fact that Antiochus IV was only the fourth in line to succeed his father, and yet became king.

Verse 9 speaks of 'thrones'. The image draws on the Canaanite image of the high god, 'El, and his council (compare Psalm 82:1). Portraying God as a judge seated on a heavenly throne is traditional (see Psalm 82:1; 1Kings 22:19), as is the association of the divine judgment with fire (see Exodus 3:2; Deuteronomy 4:24; Psalm 97:3). The description of God's throne as having 'wheels of blazing fire' comes from Ezekiel (1:15-20).

For the image of a heavenly court of divine beings ('angels', 'holy ones', Psalm 89:6,8) worshipping God, see 1Kings 22:19. 'The books' (verse 10) record people's good and bad deeds (see Malachi 3:16; Isaiah 65:6; Psalm 56:9).

At the time of the destruction of Jerusalem people burned children in the Valley of Hinnom to assuage the anger of the gods (see Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35). The fire became an image of divine punishment (see Isaiah 30:33; 66:24). The beast (Antiochus IV Epiphanes) is consigned to the fire (verse 11; in the Newer Testament compare Revelation 20:10). Gehenna became a symbol of eschatological punishment (see Matthew 5:22). The treatment of the other beasts highlights the terrible fate determined for Antiochus.

⁷After this, as I looked on in my vision at night I saw a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong, with great iron and claws of bronze. It devoured some of what it tore to pieces, and the rest it trampled under foot. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns.

⁸As I was gazing at the horns, another horn, a small one, sprouted up among them; to make room for it, three of the previous horns were plucked up by the roots. In this horn there were eyes like human eyes, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

⁹As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, with wheels of blazing fire.

¹⁰A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

¹¹Then, because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking, as I looked on, the beast was slain, consigned to the fire and consumed. ¹²As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion had been taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a limited time.

13As I watched in the night vision, I saw someone in human likeness coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. ¹⁴To him was given dominion: glory and kingship. Every people, nation, and language must serve him. His dominion is to be everlasting, never passing away; his kingship never to be destroyed.

15As for me, Daniel, my spirit within my body was troubled, and the visions of my head terrified me. ¹⁶So I approached one of the attendants to ask him what all this meant. So he said that he would disclose to me the interpretation of the matter:

¹⁷“These immense beasts, four in number, mean that four kingdoms will rise up on the earth. ¹⁸But then the holy ones of the Most High will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever – forever and ever.”

The monstrous beasts emerged from the primeval chaos (the sea). Now ‘with the clouds of heaven’ ‘someone in human likeness’ appears. The Aramaic is ܒܪ ܐܢܫܐ [bar ‘noš], the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew בֶּן־אָדָם [ben’ ādām, see 8:17]. ‘noš and ben’ ādām are clearly equivalent in Job 25:6.

In other contexts in Daniel, those who appear in human likeness are heavenly beings (angels). See Daniel 8:15 in the light of 9:21; also Daniel 10:5 and 3:25. This is traditional (see Genesis 18:2; Joshua 5:13; Judges 13:6, 8, 16). See also Ezekiel 8:2; 9-10 (and in the Newer Testament Revelation 14:14).

The heavenly being in verse 13 is closely connected with God, who is traditionally the one who comes with clouds (see Deuteronomy 33:26; Psalm 104:3; 68:5). He is subordinate to God (‘the Ancient One’) just as, in Ugarit mythology, the god Ba‘al is subordinate to the high god ‘El. In Ugarit myth Ba‘al receives everlasting dominion from ‘El.

The vision is interpreted in verses 15-18. Daniel’s reaction to the vision is expressed in typical terms. Then he approaches a member of the heavenly court (verse 10) ‘to ask him what all this meant’(verse 16). The role of an interpreting angel first appears in Zechariah (see, for example, 1:9, 14, 19). In Daniel 9:21 the interpreting angel is Gabriel who is described as ‘whom I had seen in the vision at first’. This may refer back to this text.

In the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream it was a huge stone that crashed down from the mountain and pulverised the statue. It stood for the kingdom of the Jews that would bring the other kingdoms to an end and stand forever (see 2:44).

Here it is ‘the holy ones [קְדוֹשֵׁי] of the Most High’(verse 18) who receive everlasting dominion. This could refer to the faithful members of the Jewish people. However, since ‘holy ones’ in the Older Testament almost always refers to angels (see Daniel 4:14; 12:7; though see Psalm 34:10), the reference could be to the angels whose role it is to protect God’s people. In either case the faithful Jews being persecuted under Antiochus are being assured of victory.

Jesus chose to speak of himself in terms borrowed from this text (see Mark 14:62). In this way he referred to God’s judgment in favour of the poor and persecuted with whom he, Jesus, identified.

The fourth beast symbolises the powerful Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great. The ten horns symbolise the ten rulers of the Seleucid section of the empire. The other horn (verse 20) is Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the arrogant ruler who instigated the terrible persecution which the author and his contemporaries were experiencing at the time of writing.

Such is his arrogance that he dares to challenge, and for a while prevails over, the hosts of heaven (verse 21; compare 8:9-12; 11:36). In the world view of the author and his contemporaries, when things are going badly in the earthly sphere it is because it is going badly in the heavenly sphere of the angels (the 'holy ones').

Three and a half (verse 25) is half the perfect number, seven. It represents the lowest point, but also the turning point. After three and a half we are heading up to seven. The author uses it as a symbol of a period of persecution. The persecuted must rely on God and remain faithful. Ultimately evil will be destroyed and 'the people of the holy ones of the Most High' will reign, and forever.

Since all this is portrayed as revealed long before to Daniel, the final sentence explains why only now is the revelation being made public. This is obviously a literary device.

¹⁹But I wished to be assured about the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured part of what it tore to pieces, and trampled the rest under foot; ²⁰and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn, which came up and to make room for which three of them fell off – the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke arrogantly, and that seemed greater than the others.

²¹As I looked, this horn made war against the holy ones and was prevailing over them, ²²until the Ancient One came; then judgment was passed, and dominion was given to the holy ones of the Most High. Thus the time came when the holy ones took possession of the kingdom.

²³This is what he said: "The fourth beast means that there will be a fourth kingdom on earth that will be different from all the other kingdoms; it will devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and tear it to pieces. ²⁴And the ten horns mean that from that kingdom ten kings will arise. But another king will rise up after them. This one will be different from the former ones, and he will put down three kings. ²⁵He will utter words against the Most High, and he will devastate the holy ones of the Most High, attempting to change the sacred festivals and the law. They will be given into his power for a year, two years, and half a year. ²⁶But when the court sits in judgment, his dominion will be taken away, utterly consumed and destroyed.

²⁷Then the kingship and dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High. Their kingly rule will last forever, and all dominions will serve and obey them." ²⁸Here the account ends. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter to myself.

