

Sunday May 23, 2021
Lesson 12: The Indestructible King
Scripture: Daniel 7:1-14

Context:

We come to a different passage about the revelation of God in the book of Daniel. This book of visions gives us a glimpse of how God spoke to Daniel about God and the future revelation of Jesus Christ. We are reminded of how the goodness of Jesus Christ will always prevail.

At first glance, this story reads like a horror scene from a science fiction novel. This is how most of the second half of the book reads with Daniel moving from a third-person narrative, to a first person account of his dreams and visions only he can interpret with the assistance of the angel Gabriel.¹ This is a form of apocalyptic literature, literature focusing upon the destruction of the world. This second half of the book draws heavily on earlier biblical material and is mythological in tone.² The allusions would have spoken to the ancient readers as they would be able to interpret the symbols, whereas modern readers struggle to understand what they mean.

The allusions are rooted to other Near Eastern traditions as well. The four creatures come from “the great sea,” which as we have often seen is the primeval force of chaos needing to be controlled by a storm-god.³ The deity appears as the “Ancient of Days,” a title reminiscent of epithets of the god El, “the father of years” in Ugaritic texts and “the eternal one” in Genesis.⁴ In the midst of this scene, this divine figure has a divine council after watching the destruction of four beasts.

These four beasts represent the succession of the imperial powers in the ancient Near East from the sixth to second century.⁵ The four empires were those of Babylonia (609-539 BCE), Media (united with Persia in mid-sixth century), Persia (539-332), and Greece under Alexander the Great (336-323).⁶ As these different powers came to dominate all the ancient lands, the people looked for hope, especially those in the Israelite community. Thus, we see the propaganda in Daniel of these beasts destroying one another.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 531.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The conclusion of this passage has the “Son of Man” coming down. The meaning of the term here is of a figure who looks human but is clearly more than human.⁷ In Old Testament writing, there have been three hypotheses to the identity of this figure: it is the archangel Michael, a figure representing the people of Israel, or is a Messianic figure.⁸ This final allusion of course fits with the Christian interpretation of Christ as Lord.

Application

In the Christian tradition, we often focus upon the earlier parts of the book of Daniel for good reason. The story of Daniel in the lion’s den and the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace are all easier to understand and easier on the eyes than the apocalyptic visions in later chapters of Daniel. Yet the visions in the later part of the book of Daniel also hold their own significance in the story of God and the narrative God gives us today.

As we see in this narrative, the four beasts of the empires are terrifying. Likewise, we know empires can be terrifying. We remember in the gospels how the Roman Empire brought terror into the state of Israel and how power can have one of the strongest holds on entire groups of people. When people possess or pursue power, lo and behold to anyone or anything to stand in their way.

This text, while terrifying with some of its imagery, also makes a point about how even the most powerful human forces are never truly as powerful as they present themselves. They make a mess, they may destroy others, and they may give nightmares. Yet in this case, the Son of Man comes to dominate them and to remind them of how the true power comes from those, not in terror in violence, but those in love and goodness. Daniel’s vision is meant to give hope to those who see how the beasts around them thrash about and devour those within their sights. God is reminding humanity of how no human power, as destructive as it may be, will ever win the battle of good versus evil.

We do not have to go to the ancient Near East to understand how there are “beastly” empires pursuing others who devour those in their path. We see it in the work world with how certain people eliminate and move forward to dominate others. We see it in the personal sphere where certain personalities have no problems coming in to slash and burn those who spurn them. In the church world, we see it with those who think they control or intimidate others, using manipulative tactics to stir up drama in church politics. The “beasts” of today are far more sly and easier on the eye than those we read about in Daniel’s visions.

The rough news we read is that the beasts will always prowl. They will rip others apart and they will always seek to cause others injury or harm. Once they have their eyes set on something, it is difficult for them to refocus.

The good news for us is how Christ our Lord is still the one who is Lord of our lives. No one can take away his love for us and no one can take away from his rule. While the beasts of today may have their day, ultimately our Lord will prevail and rule. Our Lord is the one who triumphs and who will always stand for us.

⁷ Ibid., 532.

⁸ Ibid.

Why do you think allusions and metaphors can help us in our walk with Christ? What “beasts” do you see lurking today? How do you name to God your sorrow or grief in seasons of distress? What comfort does it bring to you of Jesus Christ as Lord? How can you remember Jesus as Lord of your life?

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