

TWO KINGDOMS



Daniel 7:1-18
 Seventh Message
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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

We have all been horrified by the recent events in Afghanistan, especially Thursday when a suicide bomber blew himself up at the entrance to Kabul airport, killing 170. We're struggling to keep track of who's who: Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS, and now ISIS-K. Who is the enemy? Who is fighting whom? It has been strange to see armed US troops standing alongside armed Taliban fighters, whom they were fighting just a few weeks ago. ISIS formed in 2014 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi broke away from Al Qaeda, proclaiming himself caliph of the Islamic State. ISIS-K is the Afghan branch in Khorasan. Evoking past glory, they took an ancient name from the old Persian Empire. ISIS-K attracts jihadists who think the Taliban is too moderate, that it sold out by signing the agreement with the US last year. In 2019 al-Baghdadi killed himself during a US raid. ISIS was declared defeated. But, alas, ISIS continues, committed to armed struggle, to death and destruction.

We struggle for words. How do we describe last week's attack? Beastly? Subhuman? Demonic?

Caliphs and caliphates, rulers and empires, kings and kingdoms. This is what the Book of Daniel is about. Today's chapter 7 is regrettably relevant to the situation this week for it presents a series of beastly, subhuman rulers and empires bringing destruction and death.

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream. (Dan 7:1 NIV)

We notice several changes here from what has gone before in the first six chapters. We have crossed a seam in the book. There is a chronological discontinuity here. The first six chapters were six stories during the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar (1-4), Belshazzar (5), and Darius (6). The last six chapters are four visions during the reigns of Belshazzar (7-8), Darius (9), and Cyrus (10-12).

In the first half it was Nebuchadnezzar who had dreams (2, 4) and Daniel interpreted them for him. In the second half it is Daniel who has the visions, and a heavenly figure interprets them for him. These features divide the book into two halves, each of six chapters.

But there is another division. Chapters 2-7 are in Aramaic, the international language of the Babylonian and Persian Empires. Chapters 1 and 8-12 are in Hebrew. Furthermore, chapters 2-7 have a chiasmic structure, as we've seen these past two weeks.

A. Vision of 4-part statue: 4 kings/kingdoms (2)

- B. Three Jews in blazing fiery furnace (3)
- C. Nebuchadnezzar's humbling (4)
- C'. Belshazzar's humbling (5)
- B'. Daniel in lions' den (6)

A'. Vision of 4 beasts: 4 kings/kingdoms (7)

Today we look at the second half of the outer envelope of this structure: chapter 7 which matches chapter 2. As we have now come to expect, there are numerous parallels between these two chapters, 2 and 7.

Chapter 7 is the most important chapter of the book. It concludes the Aramaic chiasmic structure of chapters 2-7, and it introduces Daniel's four visions of chapters 7-12. Today's sermon will focus on chapter 7 as the climax of chapters 2-7. Early next year I will return for the second half of the book, starting with a second sermon on this chapter, focusing on how it introduces Daniel's four visions of chapters 7-12.

So, Daniel had a dream and visions, which he wrote down. In vv. 2-8 he describes what he saw on earth; in vv. 9-14 what he saw in heaven. There is, as it were, a lower register and an upper register. We are to keep them both in view: what happens on earth and what happens in heaven.

First, the lower register, what Daniel sees on earth:

Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

"The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.

"And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

"After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

"After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

"While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully." (7:2-8)

The four winds churned up the sea. In normal narrative the Great Sea is always the Mediterranean. But we're not in normal narrative here; we're in the report of a vision—an apocalyptic vision full of symbolic elements. To us these seem strange, but not so to an ancient audience. The great sea is the waters of chaos, present at the beginning of creation. These disordered chaotic waters threaten to overwhelm the ordered world. Out of these waters of chaos rose four great beasts. The first three are described as being like something, like a familiar wild animal. The first like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard. But the fourth was different: it was not like

any natural beast. Why beasts and why four?

These beasts are wild beasts, ferocious beasts. The lion, the bear, and the leopard were all familiar to the ancient Israelites; we read of them in the OT. There were no tigers, otherwise we could say, “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” These wild animals didn’t live in a zoo; they weren’t confined safely behind bars. They lived in the wild, disordered land beyond human habitation and cultivation. From there they raided into the human realm, bringing death and destruction. David fought off the lion and the bear, qualifying him to face the giant Goliath, who was threatening Israel with death and destruction.

The bear explicitly brings death and destruction: it has not finished devouring its last meal but is told to get up and devour more, much more. The fourth beast is even more ravenous, crushing and devouring its victims.

The first and third beasts, the lion and leopard, are winged. They are hybrid creatures, part animal, part bird. They are disordered creatures, from the realm of chaos. They are mongrels.

Four is the number of universality. God sent four disastrous acts of judgment against Jerusalem: sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence (Ezek 14:21). Changing the metaphor, God compares his judgment upon his own people to the death and destruction of wild beasts:

**So I will be like a lion to them,
like a leopard I will lurk by the path.
Like a bear robbed of her cubs,
I will attack them and rip them open;
like a lion I will devour them—
a wild animal will tear them apart. (Hos 13:7-8)**

Like a lion, like a leopard, like a bear, a wild animal: the same four beasts as Daniel 7.

So what is going on here with this imagery of beasts?

Out of the chaotic waters of the unformed primeval sea, God brought order. He formed a world which he populated with life. He created the human to have dominion over this life: the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the land animals. Adam was created to rule and to steward the world, living in faithful obedience to God who had provided everything he needed to flourish. But Adam broke faith and disobeyed. God expelled humanity from the garden to live east of Eden. Ever since, creation has been groaning, waiting for its true ruler. Cain, after destroying his brother Abel in death, exiled himself from God’s presence and went further east of Eden. There he built a city where he could rule as king of his own domain. Empires rose. Death and destruction spread. Order continued to give way to disorder.

Out of the chaotic rebellious disorder of Babylon God called Abraham. Out of the disorder of Egypt he called his people Israel. He brought them in to the Promised Land, the land of order, the new Eden. Here he gave them a king after his own heart, one able to defeat the lion and bear. But both king and people rebelled against God. They were unfaithful.

God brought judgment upon his own people. He removed his presence from among them, expelled them from the land, and brought foreign empires to possess the land and rule over his people. But these empires were beastly empires. They were not what true rule should look like, the rule intended by God when he created Adam, the rule intended by God when he gave them as king David the lion-and bear-tamer.

Ever since, the world has been waiting for the return of the King, for the arrival of the one, true King who will be faithfully obedient and will rule the world in justice and righteousness. One King to rule them all.

The beasts are identified as four kings (v. 17). There is an obvious parallel to Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of chapter 2: an enormous statue with a head of pure gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly iron, partly baked clay. Daniel interpreted this for Nebuchadnezzar: he is the gold head. The other three parts are three kingdoms. The parallel between the fourth part of the statue and the fourth beast is particularly close; there is much shared language.

What are the four kings or kingdoms? The gold head of the statue is explicitly identified as Nebuchadnezzar. The first beast is also Nebuchadnezzar. There had been prior kings and empires, but it was Nebuchadnezzar who captured Jerusalem, and took the people and temple vessels captive to Babylon. He is the beginning of God’s people living under foreign dominion, living under beastly empire. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn an important lesson. God humbled him until he learnt that God’s dominion not his was eternal. In chapter 4 Nebuchadnezzar became like an animal and his hair like eagles’ feathers. Here in chapter 7 the wings of the first beast were ripped off: he ceased to be a mongrel beast. It was raised up on two feet like a human and given a human mind: he ceased to be a beast. He became human. To be truly human is to acknowledge that one is only human not God, and that God is God.

Opinion is divided on the identity of the other three beasts. There are two major views, differing primarily on the identity of the fourth beast, whether it be Greece, that is the Greek empires of Alexander the Great and his successors, or Rome. The four beasts are either Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece; or Babylon, Media-Persia, Greece and Rome. So, do I identify the fourth beast as Greece or Rome? My answer is the same as six weeks ago: neither and both.

The first beast is Nebuchadnezzar specifically, not Babylon in general, because Belshazzar did not learn his father’s lesson. He remained a beast because he refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of God. The other three beasts are not specific empires, but empire in general. Empire is ravenous; it brings death and destruction. Empire is given dominion. Who gives dominion? It is not stated, but must be God who grants temporary dominion to earthly empires.

Though I do not think that the fourth beast of Daniel’s vision or the fourth part of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue is Greece or Rome, I am sure that Jews living in the early second century BC would have identified the rule of the Hellenistic Seleucid Empire as the fourth beast. And that those living in the first century AD would have identified Rome as the fourth beast.

There was a second part of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream: a rock, cut not by human hands, hit the feet of the statue. The statue shattered and disappeared. But the rock became a huge mountain filling the earth. So also there is a second part of Daniel’s dream. He sees into heaven, into the upper register.

**“As I looked,
“thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.**

**A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened.” (7:9-10)**

It’s an awesome vision of God’s throne room. The Ancient of Days, the eternal God, sat down on his throne, attended by countless courtiers. The court took its seat. The books were opened. It’s time for a judicial ruling from the ultimate authority, the eternal God. What ruling will the judge issue?

“Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)” (7:11-12)

While this seating of the court was happening in the upper register, down in the lower register the little horn was mouthing off. It was full of words, great words, boastful, arrogant words, words of self-exaltation, words against God and his people. But, effortlessly, the fourth beast was slain and thrown into the blazing fire, the river of fire flowing from God’s presence, the river of judgment and final destruction. When God calls time, it is over, effortlessly!

Daniel sees more:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (7:13-14)

One like a son of man: this means he is truly human, in contrast to the sequence of earlier figures like beasts. The beasts rise from chaos and bring destruction. This truly human one will be like the first human, Adam, whom God created to rule over his creation, to bring order. He comes with the clouds of heaven, the clouds upon which rides God Almighty. He is given dominion, glory and power—eternal dominion. All nations and peoples of every language worship him. We’ve heard this language before. Nebuchadnezzar was given dominion but had to learn this was not eternal dominion. He commanded nations and peoples of every language to worship his image, but had to learn this was inappropriate. But here is one who is given eternal dominion, and whose worship by all nations, peoples and language is appropriate: the one like a son of man.

Here is the true ruler for which creation has been groaning since the expulsion of Adam from the garden. Here is the one true King for whom God’s people have been waiting since the fall of Jerusalem. One King to rule them all.

Who is this one like a son of man, one who is human but rides the clouds like God? With the hindsight of the NT we can answer: it is the risen Lord Jesus Christ. As we heard in our Scripture reading, when Jesus was arrested and brought before the Jewish leaders, the high priest asked him,

“Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Mark 14:61-62)

The high priest immediately understood the claim Jesus was making, and declared it blasphemy. The leaders condemned Jesus as worthy of death. The guards took him away and beat him. Jesus submitted to their abuse and scorn. The Jewish leaders entered into an unholy alliance, a mongrel alliance with the Roman authorities to kill him in the most brutal and shameful way possible.

But God has installed this one, despised and forsaken, as ruler of his kingdom and Lord of all. The good news of Christ crucified is a scandal to the Jews, folly to the Gentiles, but the power and wisdom of God to those who give their allegiance to Christ.

Daniel was troubled by what he saw in his vision and requested an interpretation.

“I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this.

“So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: ‘The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.’” (7:15-18)

Daniel has seen the one like a son of man given eternal dominion. Now he is told that the saints of the Most High will also receive this eternal kingdom. One like a son of man, and the saints of the Most High. These are two new elements that were not in the first half of the book. We will hear more about the saints in the second half of the chapter.

Meanwhile, Daniel wants to know more:

“Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast... I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up.”(7:19-20)

Some of you no doubt feel the same way: you want to know about the fourth beast, the ten horns and the little horn. But you’ll have to wait a few months until we cover the rest of the chapter.

King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that it was not appropriate for nations and peoples of every language to worship him. But it is appropriate to worship the true King, this one like the son of man who was ushered into the presence of the Ancient of Days to be given eternal dominion. The succession of beastly empires did not end with Greece or Rome. It continues. Some of God’s people live today under harsh beastly empires. We are concerned for Christians in Afghanistan as the Taliban takes over the country. Each week we pray for the persecuted church in a different country from the Open Doors World Watch List. God is able to preserve his people under great persecution.

The Jews expected that God would remove the beastly empires, which they identified as Rome, and bring in his eternal kingdom. Instead, in the middle of time, with the beastly empires still in place, God has brought in his eternal kingdom. Beastly rule continues on earth. But God in Christ has defeated the powers of darkness behind these beastly kingdoms. He “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14).

He is building a truly universal kingdom, even while the kingdoms of this world continue. Transferred into God’s kingdom in Christ, we are people who formerly didn’t belong together now learning how to belong together in Jesus. We are now family, sharing in each other’s lives: joys and sorrows, celebration and grief. Living life together. Today is Connections Sunday, when you can learn

about the opportunities to engage in community life together here at PBCC. Together we help one another remain faithful, so we can flourish in God's kingdom while yet living as exiles in a foreign kingdom.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus...make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:11-13)

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