

I suspect that Daniel’s response to all this is a lot like ours!
“my thoughts greatly alarmed me”!

The visions alarmed *Daniel* (he says that twice) –
so it’s natural that we should find them alarming as well.
They may seem wild, scary, bizarre –
but that is quite normal for apocalyptic literature.

Vern Poythress once said that the book of Revelation should not be read as a puzzle book –
but as a picture book.

The same is true of Daniel.
If you want to understand this,
you will do better to watch the pictures – rather than turn it into a puzzle.

Here in Daniel 7, we shift from the stories of part 1 to the apocalyptic visions of part 2.
But we do so while we are still in the Aramaic language section –
which the author uses in order to make clear that these two parts fit together.

But what do we mean by “apocalyptic”?
One commentator says this really well:

“Biblical apocalyptic is a revelation of the ending of this present age,
which is an age characterized by conflict,
and its replacement by the final age of peace.
It shows us ahead of time the end of the kingdoms of this world
and their replacement by the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.
This revelation is unfolded in complex and mysterious imagery,
and has the purpose of comforting and exhorting the faithful.
Apocalyptic literature thus proclaims a theology of hope
to those whom the world has marginalized:
it reminds us that God is presently on the throne
and that he will ultimately triumph.
In the meantime, whatever the present cost may be in terms of suffering,
obedience to God is the only way....” (Duguid, 107)

“As a result, to paraphrase the words of Winston Churchill’s great speech,
he will fight them on the beaches;
he will fight them in the streets;
he will fight them in the hedgerows,
on the land and on the sea.
He expects nothing other than blood, sweat, and tears,
but he will *never* surrender.

Rather, he looks forward with unshakeable hope to his final vindication, when the day at last comes for God to act decisively to bring in his new and final age of salvation.” (Duguid, 107)

1. Daniel’s Night Vision (v1-14)

a. The Four Beasts (v1-8)

In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. ² Daniel declared,^[a] “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. ³ And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. ⁴ The first was like a lion and had eagles’ wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. ⁵ And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, ‘Arise, devour much flesh.’ ⁶ After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it.

We are still in the Aramaic section of Daniel.

As such, we are encouraged to see this chapter connected particularly to chapters 2-6 (even though thematically it connects more with chapters 8-12!).

The four beasts of Daniel 7, then should be seen in connection with the four kingdoms of ch 2.

In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar saw a vision of a great image with its head of gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, and its legs of iron, and its feet of iron and clay.

We saw then that the image represented a fourfold kingdom.

The unity of the great image showed that these were not entirely separate kingdoms – but were all connected – with Nebuchadnezzar as its head.

Probably the four kingdoms should be identified as Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman.

I say “probably” because it is not entirely clear that Daniel is trying to make one-to-one correspondences.

In the same way, when you look at the four beasts of Daniel 7, you see the same *pattern* as Daniel 2 – with the same ambiguity about specific identities.

So, for instance, you could say that the first kingdom is Babylon – the lion with eagles’ wings – every patriotic Babylonian would recognize the lion as a symbol more of the Assyrian kings – but if you only identify the beasts with particular nations – you will miss a large part of what Daniel is seeing.

After all, where do the beasts come from?

“the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea.
And four great beasts came up out of the sea.”

(This theme will recur in Revelation 13)

The sea is often portrayed in scripture as the source of chaos and disorder.
God provides boundaries for the sea – so that it does not overwhelm the land.
The sea is also used by the prophets as a picture of the nations –
Isaiah speaks of the Assyrian invasion as the sea overflowing its bounds
until Jerusalem is a tiny island amidst the roaring of the nations/seas.
(Isaiah 8, cf. 17, 19, 27).

Later we will be told that the four beasts are four *kings* that will arise from the earth.

The lion with eagles' wings
is Nebuchadnezzar (the head of gold from Daniel 2).
After all, he had lost his mind – and became like a beast.

The bear is raised up on one side – with three ribs in its mouth between its teeth.
It devours much flesh.
That would fit well with the Persian domination of the ancient world –
becoming the single greatest empire in human history
in terms of the percentage of the human race that was under its rule.

The leopard with four wings and four heads fits well
with the Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great –
which split four ways after his death.
Also the speed of the leopard fits well with the speed with which Alexander
conquered the whole Persian empire in six years!

Some have tried to split the Medes and the Persians into two different kingdoms –
but the book of Daniel always portrays the Medes and Persians as *one kingdom*
For instance, in the next chapter 8:20 speaks of a ram with two horns –
and says that the two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.
Also think of how Daniel speaks of the “laws of the Medes and Persians.”
(After all, Cyrus had defeated his grandfather, Astyages the Mede,
eleven years *before* he conquered Babylon,
so the Medes and Persians had been united as one kingdom).

So it is better to see the three kingdoms as the Babylon, Persia, and Macedonia.
(People today often say “Greek” – but the Greeks *hated* Alexander the Great –
who himself was *not* Greek, but Macedonian!)

But these identifications are only *partly* accurate!
And we learn this from the fourth beast.

⁷ *After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns.*

⁸ *I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.*

The fourth beast is different.

Notice that after the fourth beast is destroyed (v11-12)
the rest of the beasts continue for a season and a time.

In other words, these beasts cannot simply be considered
as the great empires of the ancient world.

They continue after the fourth beast has been overthrown by the Ancient of Days –
shorn of their dominion – it is true –
but they continue.

In other words, yes, you are supposed to think of Babylon, Persia, and Greece –
but you are supposed to see *more* than Babylon, Persia, and Greece.

You are supposed to see a pattern that undergirds history.
And that is why the fourth beast is so important!

In one sense, the fourth beast connects well with Rome.
But it is important to recognize that we are talking about a *beast* –
something that is sub-human – and yet still resembles a human.

It is not given a comparison to a particular animal –
for it has 10 horns, iron teeth –
and can only be described as “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong.”

And yet the “little horn” that comes up among the ten horns
has “eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.”
In other words, it has both intelligence and arrogance –
a dangerous combination!

Think about it:
a powerful beast with human intelligence and arrogance!

This is what the kingdoms of man have become!
The makers of monster movies all understand this.
If you make the monster into something entirely *other*
something totally unrecognizable –
it loses some of its monstrosity.

As one commentator puts it,
“The human being is a creature who has in himself or herself
the possibility of descent to the bestial,
indeed it is possible for the human to become more bestial than beasts,
because we should have a moral conscience” (Sumner, 165)

Alexander Solzhenitsyn says this well in the *Gulag Archipelago*:
“Yes, a human being hesitates and bobs back and forth
between good and evil all his life.
He slips, falls back, clambers up, repents,
things begin to darken again.
But just so long as the threshold of evil is not crossed,
the possibility of returning remains,
and he himself is still within reach of our hope.
But when, through the density of evil actions,
the result either of their own extreme degree
or the absoluteness of his power,
he suddenly crosses the threshold,
he has left humanity behind,
and without perhaps the possibility of return.” (in Sumner, 165)

Solzhenitsyn is describing the Soviet prison system.

He speaks of how many people were dehumanized –
not the prisoners – in spite of the torture and mistreatment, they remained human!
But the thousands – even the hundreds of thousands – of ordinary Russians
who participated in the evil – as informants, guards, party operatives –
and who daily made little decisions to continue down the path of injustice
until little was left of their humanity.

If all you see in Daniel 7 is a symbolic picture of “kingdoms” or “kings”
then you will miss the central point of the chapter!

Because the problem is that humanity is becoming bestial.

Where are the *humans* in this chapter?
Where is true *humanity* to be found?!

God created man in his own image!

But man has rejected God and has chosen to live like beasts.

Some would say that Daniel (and apocalyptic literature in general)
has a very pessimistic view of history.

In one sense this is true!

Daniel certainly does not believe in the modern notion of “progress.”
He does not think that things are getting better and better – always improving!

The movement in Daniel 2 was from gold to clay.

The movement in Daniel 7 is ever more bestial –
ever more terrifying.

The only way out is for *God* to do something!

So as we watch with horror at the beast,
our eyes are suddenly drawn to a different sight:

[read]

b. The Ancient of Days (v9-12)

⁹ *“As I looked,
thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
its wheels were burning fire.
¹⁰ A stream of fire issued
and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.*

Judgment Day has come.

The suddenness of the change in scene is designed to reassure you:
just when you think that things can only get worse,
God acts.

The “Ancient of Days” carries echoes from Psalm 90 –
“from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.”

There is also a way in which the Ancient of Days is more *human* than the kings of this age.
Of course, that’s entirely the wrong way of putting it!
But when you see the Ancient of Days – you see one who will make things *right*.
The sight of God sitting upon his throne should be a comforting sight
to all who long for a world of peace and justice!

Unlike Nebuchadnezzar’s great image – this is not a blind, deaf, and mute idol.
This is the living God who sees, hears, and speaks!

And while the vision of God is glorious and majestic –
it is not horrifying!

His throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire –
God’s throne after all, is also his chariot!
(as Ezekiel had seen).

But then Daniel looks again –

because he hears “the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking”:

¹¹ “I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

Verses 11-12 are crucial for understanding Daniel’s picture of history:

when the Ancient of Days sits in judgment on the fourth Beast,
the fourth beast will be killed and its body destroyed and burned with fire.
After that the rest of the beasts will continue for a limited time –
although without the dominion that they had before!

This is why you can’t really say that the beasts are *simply* the successive world empires.
Because the other three beasts continue after the destruction of the fourth beast!

Some say that the fourth beast is the Macedonian empire –
and that Antiochus Epiphanes is the “little horn.”

But after the death of Antiochus Epiphanes,
the Seleucid dynasty continued –

and there was more conflict between Judea and the Seleucids!

Others say that the fourth beast is Rome –

although it’s a little more difficult to identify the ‘little horn’ in that case –
but clearly the Roman empire was *not* destroyed when Jesus came!

But whether you say that the fourth beast is the Macedonian Empire or the Roman Empire,
either way, it’s not talking about *political history*!

What we need to see is that Daniel is watching a vision of the spiritual realities
behind the history of this age.

If you simply try to read Daniel in terms of political history,
you will become convinced that Daniel is just plain *wrong*!

So what does it mean that

the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire?

Well, that is why verses 13-14 are the heart of our passage!

Because into the midst of this beastly passage,
comes one “like a son of man.”

c. The Son of Man (v13-14)

¹³ “I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,

*and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
14 And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.*

In chapter 2 we heard of the stone that smashed the great image
and grew into a mountain that filled the whole earth!

Now in chapter 7 we see a little more of what that was saying!

This one like a son of man comes on the clouds of heaven.

Throughout the OT, *only* divine beings come on the clouds of heaven.

There are many references to God coming on the clouds of heaven.

There are *no references* to lesser beings coming on the clouds of heaven.

Therefore, the “one like a son of man” is pretty clearly revealed as God himself.

Jesus says plainly at his trial before the Sanhedrin in Mark 14:62
that “you will see the Son of Man, sitting at the right hand of Power
and coming with the clouds of heaven” –
thereby claiming to be the divine Son of Man from Daniel 7.

So what is this speaking of?

Some think that this is referring to the final judgment.

In one sense, they are right.

This *is* referring to the final judgment.

But remember verse 12.

The lives of the other three beasts were prolonged for a season and a time.

So others say that this is referring to Christ’s first coming –
and particularly to his ascension to the right hand of the Father.

And they, too, are right.

You see this in Revelation chapter 5,

when the ascended Christ comes to the right hand of God.

But it would be more accurate to say that for Daniel,

everything that Christ does gets telescoped into this one statement.

If all we had was Daniel 7,

we would probably think that when the Son of Man comes,

he will destroy the beast and establish his everlasting dominion...

Just like that!

All of that is clear!

God wins!

The Son of Man reigns!

The beast will be destroyed!

But...

Daniel is perplexed – particularly about the *fourth beast*.

2. The Interpretation of the Vision: God’s Kingdom Will Triumph! (v15-28)

a. The Kingdoms of This Age Are Beastly (v15-18)

¹⁵ “As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me^[b] was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. ¹⁶ I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things.

Daniel is rightly alarmed by his beastly visions –

and so he asks “one of those who stood there” about the interpretation of all this.

Verses 17-18 provide the most simple and clear statement of the basic point:

¹⁷ ‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. ¹⁸ But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’

This is the basic point of Christian apocalyptic:

Yes, you are going to suffer – and it’s going to be hard.

But in the end, God wins – and his people will reign with him forever!

But...

Daniel is perplexed – particularly about the *fourth beast*.

b. The Fourth Beast “Shall Be Different” (v19-25)

¹⁹ “Then I desired to know the truth 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 and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet, ²⁰ and about the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn that came up and before which three of them fell, the horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and that seemed greater than its companions. ²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, ²² until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

Because the fourth beast –

and particularly that little horn that had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things –

that horn that combined intelligence and arrogance –

that most dangerous combination in a powerful man!

After all, that horn “made war with the saints and prevailed over them...”

That doesn’t sound good!

What does that mean?

²³ “Thus he said: ‘As for the fourth beast,
there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth,
which shall be different from all the kingdoms,
and it shall devour the whole earth,
and trample it down, and break it to pieces.

²⁴ As for the ten horns,
out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise,
and another shall arise after them;
he shall be different from the former ones,
and shall put down three kings.

²⁵ He shall speak words against the Most High,
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,
and shall think to change the times and the law;
and they shall be given into his hand
for a time, times, and half a time.

The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that shall be different from all the kingdoms.

How is it different?

Well, for one, it shall devour the whole earth, trample it down, and break it to pieces.

Okay, if you take that *literally* –

then it has never happened that any kingdom devoured the whole earth.

Indeed, the *Persian* empire was the largest empire ever in terms of people!

(but Persia is clearly included as the second or third kingdom!).

So let’s take it figuratively.

Well, but then “devouring the whole earth, trampling it, and breaking it in pieces”

is just what all powerful kingdoms do!

This is why we keep hearing that this beast is *different*.

This beast is not your ordinary beast.

What Daniel is seeing is the power behind the throne.

The fourth beast – to put it bluntly – is speaking of the City of Man –
what the book of Revelation will call “Babylon the Great.”

You can see *lots* of instances of it in history –
but it is not to be identified with one kingdom only.

Joachim of Fiore thought that he recognized it in 12th century Italy!

The Joachite furor that followed

wound up thinking that Emperor Frederick II would be the great
Emperor of the Last Days who would smite the Antichrist
(whom some thought was the Pope –

of course, the Pope claimed that Frederick was the Antichrist!).
In every age, people see signs of Antichrist.
In every age, people see the handiwork of the *fourth kingdom*.

And from all that scripture tells us,
we will see the handiwork of the fourth kingdom again before the end!
The pattern in scripture is that as the Kingdom of God advances –
so also does the opposition against Christ's kingdom.

I could easily envision a day when the vast majority of the world's population might be saved –
and yet, because God's pattern is to choose the weak and the foolish
to shame the wise and powerful,
the persecution could be far worse in that day than ever before!
As Americans we think that "majority rules" –
but that has never actually been the case.
A minority with wealth and influence will always have power over the many who are poor.

But of course, in the end, there will be *one* who will sit in judgment over all the earth.
And in that day, the dominion of the devil will be taken away.

c. The Everlasting Kingdom Shall Prevail (v26-28)

²⁶ *But the court shall sit in judgment,
and his dominion shall be taken away,
to be consumed and destroyed to the end.*

²⁷ *And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'*

And I would suggest that this has already happened in Jesus.
The initial fulfillment of Daniel 7 came to pass when Jesus came on the clouds of heaven
to the right hand of the Ancient of Days in Revelation chapter 5.
In that day, the dominion of Satan was overthrown.
Satan had usurped Adam's place.
He was a usurper – so he had no *right* to rule.
But his dominion was supreme.
From Adam to Christ, the human race was under his thumb.
He had deceived the nations –
and Satan even did pretty well at subduing Israel to his will!

Remember what Satan said to Jesus –
I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth –
if you will only worship me!
Satan had the power to bestow all the kingdoms of the earth on Jesus!

After all – God had given Adam dominion over the creatures.
But Adam listened to the voice of the serpent –
and thus all humanity fell under the dominion of the devil.

But in the resurrection of Christ – in the ascension of the Son of Man –
the Second Adam repaired the fault of our first father.
And he triumphed over the Devil – casting him down
so that he might deceive the nations no more.

And when you consider the history of humanity from Christ to the present,
you see a very different history!
Oh, sure, Satan is still an annoying pest –
he is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour –
but his *dominion* has been removed.

²⁷ *And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High;
his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'*

You are citizens of the kingdom of heaven!
You will reign with Christ forever.

And yet Daniel says:

²⁸ *"Here is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly alarmed me, and my color changed, but I kept the matter in my heart."*

Yes it is encouraging to know that God wins!
But such knowledge does not change the fact
that there is great suffering between now and then.
Daniel may have been hoping that the restoration from exile
would bring the final judgment and the glory of God's people.
But now he sees that there will be a long and painful saga for the people of God.

How do you live with such knowledge?
As you have ever lived.
Trusting God in the midst of trial
because God is faithful.