

DANIEL IN BABYLON

by A.O. Hudson

The Beginning of Visions --The story of a great man's faith

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER of Daniel begins what is virtually an independent book--the book of visions. The first six chapters are histories; they relate events that took place during the space of some seventy years from the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign--all the time of the universal empire, that of Babylon. Chapter 7 goes back some seventeen years, to the first year of Belshazzar, the last native king of Babylon, and tells of the visions which came to the aged prophet and have been of such surpassing interest to every generation of 'watchers' from that day to this.

At this time Daniel was about seventy-four years of age. His old master and friend, King Nebuchadnezzar, had been dead for eleven years. He was no longer chief of the wise men of Babylon; all his official ranks had gone, and he lived as a private citizen, almost certainly among his own fellow-exiles in some residential quarter of the city. His only friend at court was probably Queen Nitocris, younger daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, wife of Naboniduss, the reigning monarch and mother of Belshazzar, who this very year had been promoted to joint-rule with his father. The voice of Ezekiel had been silent for twenty-one years so that, although he was only Daniel's age, we do not know whether he was alive or dead. So far as the Book of Daniel itself indicates, the prophet was alone, and in solitude recorded for future generations the vivid vision-pictures with which we, as prophetic students, have become so familiar.

Here, then, in the first year of Belshazzar, Daniel slept and dreamed. In earlier years the purposes of God had been conveyed to the mind of the great king by means of dreams--the dream of the great image, the dream of the great tree, and Daniel had been employed as the agent in making known to the king the meaning of the dreams. From those dreams we have our first understanding of the Divine arrangement of Gentile Times followed by the setting up of the Kingdom of God. Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome; these are the four successive empires, from Nebuchadnezzar's day to our own, succeeded by the incoming and all-conquering Kingdom of God, pictured by the manlike image of gold, silver, copper and iron. The Seven Times, during which the tree of the dream was to be bound with iron and copper, has been held by many to indicate in symbolic language the duration of those Gentile Times ; without embarking on the hazardous seas of chronological speculation it can certainly be admitted that the mystic number 2520, which is the equivalent of symbolic "seven times" is a significant one in the succession of periods which make up human history as it is punctuated by events momentous from the standpoint of the Divine Plan. (A "time" in Daniel, *Meb. iddan*, is the Sumerian time measure which they called the "day" of God or "Divine day," a period of 360 years), hence the 3 1/2 times of prophecy is 1260 years, and seven times is 2520 derived from the 1262 year period in which eclipses of the sun and moon recur in the same order.) It cannot be denied that the cycle of 2520 years, from the inception of the "head of gold" empire brings us just about to the present day when it is patent to the most casual observer that the feet of iron are about to collapse into the sea of burning flame and so go into utter destruction, just as is indicated under other symbols in the vision of Daniel 7 which we are now about to examine. We have, therefore, already a direct connection between the days of Daniel and our own day as the beginning and ending of an epoch in the outworking of God's purposes leading directly to the inauguration of the greatest epoch of all--the Kingdom of God upon earth.

The king's vision was one of human pride and achievement--a colossal image of a man, towering up into the skies. Daniel's dream was of something very different--a manifestation of beast-like forces begotten of chaos, striving together for mastery, and finally disappearing before the superior power of the Lord from Heaven. There are therefore important lessons for all Christians to be learned from the pictures that flickered across the prophet's sleeping mind on that quiet night in ancient Babylon so many thousands of years ago.

Detailed interpretations of the dream, both historical and futurist, are legion and there is no intention here of adding to the number. In a treatise which is descriptive of the life of Daniel in Babylon, such detailed interpretation of prophecy would not be altogether in place. But because this treatise is a life of Daniel in

Babylon, something of what it meant to Daniel and his people at that time is most decidedly in place, and upon that background the prophetic students may, if they will, proceed to elaborate their interpretations. "I saw in my vision by night," says Daniel, "and, behold, the four winds of heaven strove upon the great sea. And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another." (Dan. 7:2,3) The account goes on to describe the first beast as like a lion with eagles' wings, rearing up on its hind legs in the endeavor to walk as a man, and, too, having a man's heart. Then came a second, like a bear, in a recumbent position, but with one foreleg flexed as though in the act of getting up. Thirdly, a leopard with four heads and four wings, and finally, a beast so alien to all known animals and so terrible in its aspect that Daniel was hard put to it to find words sufficiently descriptive. The life of the four beasts was brief. There came a great appearance in the heavens, the setting of celestial thrones and the coming of the Most High for judgment; the arraignment of those beasts before him and their condemnation and destruction in the fiery flame. Then the sequel; the advent of a might one, the Son of Man, to receive the kingship of earth and rule over it in a kingdom which should never pass away. Four beasts, born of chaos, doomed to destruction, are succeeded by an everlasting kingdom. Taken in conjunction with the earlier vision of the great image, the application and the meaning almost immediately suggests itself.

Daniel had lived in Babylon for more than fifty years, the greater part of his life. He was thoroughly versed in the history, the mythology, and the folklore of the Babylonians. He had been Chief of all their wise men, their priesthoods and their philosophers. It would not be surprising, therefore, if the `background' of his dream, or as we might say, the `setting', had a distinctly Babylonian flavour. In such a manner the meaning and application of the dream would be much more readily grasped by those devout Jews in Babylon who were to be the immediate recipients of this Divine revelation.

The four winds "strove upon the great sea." That expression goes right back to the beginning of Babylonian mythology. The old stories of Creation told of a time before the gods had made man, or the solid earth that was man's home, when all was chaos, a dark and dismal abyss in which the winds and waters raged and howled, and nothing had any shape or form. That chaos was personified by the Babylonians and pictured as a terrible monster named Tiamat. When the time of Creation drew near, Bel-Marduk, the life-giver, the Son of Ea the God of the sea, came forth with his arrows of light to overcome and slay Tiamat and turn the dark chaos into the ordered earth illuminated by the light of the sun, preparatory to creating man upon it. All of which, of course, can be traced back pretty clearly to the original truth expressed in Genesis, "In the beginning the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, and God said `Let there be light' and there was light." And the subsequent work of Creation was carried out by one "without whom was not anything made that was made," the only-begotten Son of God.

The Hebrew word for `deep' in Genesis 1:1 is *tehom*, which is the Hebrew equivalent of Tiamat, and is directly derived from that Babylonian word. So Daniel saw these four beast-like creatures emerging from the darkness and confusion of chaos and of evil. They were not from God; they did not have their origin in the heavens; they came from the earth and from the basest elements of the earth, and because they were thus born of chaos they must sooner or later meet the powers of heaven in mortal conflict, and be overthrown. That, at least, was the first fundamental truth Daniel drew from this vivid dream.

The first beast was like a lion with eagle's wings, a familiar creature to Daniel. There were many such in Babylon. Stone lions with eagles' wings and usually with human heads stood guard at every palace gateway and temple portico. There are two standing at present in the British Museum. Wall, buildings and gateways were adorned with sculptured reliefs of the same creatures. The winged lion was the symbol of Babylon, just as Landseer's lions in Trafalgar Square are the symbols of Britain. Daniel, seeing that creature in his dream, knew at once and without any doubt that he was looking upon the symbol of the world-empire that had been pictured in the `head of gold' of the image--the empire of Babylon. But this lion was standing, rearing itself up on its hind legs like a man, whereas the winged lions of Babylon are usually pictured standing on all fours, or recumbent. That, too, must have suggested something else to Daniel's mind. When the lions or other creatures of Babylonian mythology were pictured as rearing up on two legs it was because they were fighting an enemy. So with the lion of Daniel's dream. It had a man's heart, the sagacity and intelligence of a man--maybe the outstanding soldier whose skill and sagacity established the empire, Nebuchadnezzar--but it was fighting for its life all the time, and eventually it went down before its foes.

Daniel saw that happen in the dream. The American Version is not quite correct. Verse 4 should read, "I beheld till the wings were plucked wherewith it was lifted up from the earth." Daniel lived to see the wings plucked. The second beast was a bear, a beast alien to Babylonian mythology, for there were never any bears in Babylonia. Bears are creatures of the wooded mountains and the land of the two rivers has no mountains and few trees. Here was an alien power which "raised up itself on one side." That part of the picture would be familiar to Daniel, for the sculptures of Babylon did show animals with one foreleg bent in recumbent position and the other straightened as the beast "rose up to the prey." So, eventually, Persia, the land of mountains and of bears, the silver breast of the image, sprang upon Babylon, Egypt and Lydia, and devoured them, just as the bear in the vision devoured the flesh from the three ribs it carried in its mouth.

Daniel could not have known, by his own unaided knowledge, what was prefigured by the four-winged and four-headed leopard, the third beast of his dream. Very possibly though his mind was enlightened by the Holy Spirit, so that in some dim way he was able to see into futurity and sense something of the swiftly-moving armies of Greece which spread the third empire so rapidly over the four quarters of the world, and when it had reached its wildest limits at the death of Alexander the Great, became divided into four realms under four heads. It remained for later historians to show how accurately the march of events fitted the circumstances of the dream.

Then came the fourth beast, "dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth . . . and it had ten horns." This beast was evidently unlike any known earthly animal, and its aspect was such as to strike terror into the beholder. This was the beast which figured most prominently in the Divine judgment shortly to come, and with that hint as to its continued existence right up until the time of that judgment it is not surprising that most students think of Rome, the successor of Greece in world rulership, destined to rule until the Son of Man should come in the glory of his Kingdom and sweep away every vestige of man's rule from the earth. According to Daniel, this beast, more than them all, was the enemy of God's saints and made war against them; this, said the angel, shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth and shall not only prevail over the saints but shall speak blasphemy against the Most High and prevail during the mystic period of trial and persecution, the time, times and half a time, the twelve hundred and sixty days which always betokens oppression, persecution and testing of the faithful in God.

One wonders if this strange and terrible beast which Daniel saw in his vision was in fact the dragon or serpent of Babylon, the mysterious *sirussu*, whose form is so often seen on the sculptures of that ancient city. That was a creature like nothing known in Nature. The four bronze serpents guarding the gateway of the Temple of Bel-Marduke in Babylon were *sirussu*. More than anything else that mythical creature symbolized the power of evil and the archangel of evil, the Devil himself, and when in the Scriptures the dragon or the serpent is mentioned, it is always this strange and terrible beast that is in mind. From Daniel to Revelation there is the same idea made prominent; the dragon of ancient Babylon is manifest in that great power which for twenty out of the twenty-five centuries of Gentile Times has wielded its crushing iron rule over the nations and persecuted the saints of God.

But this was not the end of the dream. The forces of heaven were moving to judgment and away in the celestial realm the outraged holiness of God was ready now to sweep back into the oblivion of chaos all these beast-like systems which for so long had usurped his domain. To be continued.