

**Daniel 7:1-28, No. 11****“Apocalyptic”****February 5, 2017****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

With chapter 7 we enter the second half of the book of Daniel and leave behind the more familiar and popular parts of the book. The final chapters of Daniel record visions of the future that Daniel received at various times. As the stories in the first six chapters are arranged chronologically, beginning when Daniel and his friends were young captives in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and ending when he was a highly influential official in the Persian court of Darius the Mede, so the visions are also given in chronological order. The vision recorded in chapter 7 he received in the first year of Belshazzar, the Babylonian prince regent; the vision of chapter 8 he received in the third year of Belshazzar, that of chapter 9 he received in the first year of Darius, and so on.

I will attend to some details of the vision as we read it, but tonight I want to consider this prophecy as an example of them all, and, in particular, as a specimen of the prophetic genre called “apocalyptic.” As we proceed, it will become obvious to you that understanding this strange and foreign genre is immensely important to a proper reading of the Bible’s prophetic literature. Most of the real conflict in evangelical interpretations of biblical prophecy originate in these sections of apocalyptic prophecy, in Daniel, in Matthew 24, and in Revelation.

**Text Comment**

- v.1 Scholars debate whether this year was 553 B.C. or 550/549 B.C. If the latter, that was the year that Cyrus defeated Astyages, his Median overlord. In other words, that year was the beginning of the end for Babylon. [Longman, 180] In most biblical prophecy the Lord speaks to his prophet in some way and the prophet relays the message to God’s people. In apocalyptic, the medium of instruction is typically a vision that the prophet then describes.
- v.2 Immediately we come face to face with the figurative nature of this literature. The four winds of heaven are blowing all at once, churning up the sea, not blowing waves in a single direction as would happen in a great storm. As you know from your reading of the Bible and, even more so, if you are at all familiar with the mythology of the ancient near eastern world – a mythology the Bible often refers to both for its familiarity and in order to mock it or contradict it – the sea, and especially the stormy sea, is the image of chaos, of disorder, and of the evil that destroys. [Longman, 181] In both Babylonian and Canaanite religion the sea (usually identified with one of the gods) is ranged against both the other gods and nature. This explains the many statements in the OT of God’s power over the sea:
  1. God blasts the sea with his rebuke (Ps. 18:15)
  2. He sets boundaries for the sea (Job 7:12; Jer. 5:22)
  3. He rebukes the sea and causes it to dry up (Nahum 1:4)
  4. He tramples the sea (Hab. 3:15)
  5. He punishes and slays sea monsters (Isa. 27:1) [Longman, 182]

The Lord uses the ancient near eastern depiction of the sea as the force of disorder and chaos to assert his own sovereignty over the universe he has created.

- v.4 This beast is generally understood to represent Babylon, and the clipping of his wings and being lifted from the ground to stand on two feet is taken to be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar's period of insanity and then his restoration.

Once again there is a backstory here that would have been immediately obvious to Jewish readers. God created the animals after their kinds. The distinction of kinds and their separation was made a matter of Israel's law (e.g. Deut. 22:9-11). The different parts of animal or vegetable creation were to be kept separate. But here they are mixed. The picture is of something gone terribly wrong, of a disordered world, and would have struck the reader as something grotesque. The beasts, in our modern parlance, are monsters. [Duguid, 108]

- v.5 The problem of identifying these four beasts is the same as that found in chapter 2 and Nebuchadnezzar's first dream. What do these beasts represent? We will be told in v. 17 that they represent four kingdoms that will arise on the earth. But which kingdoms? This bear would be the Persian Empire, the point of the three ribs in its mouth apparently that it consumes its prey. Obviously the Persian Empire devoured peoples and nations, Babylon first of all. Now, I should say, that liberal biblical scholarship of Daniel prefers to think of the bear as the Medes and the next image, the leopard, as the Persians. The reason for this is that if Daniel were written in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C – as they believe it must have been – not really being predictive prophecy but only appearing to be, Rome would not yet have been on the horizon of the near eastern world and so the final empire would have to be Greece. The author couldn't have predicted Rome's ascendance to worldwide power. The author would have known all about Greece, but not about Rome. But if the fourth beast is Greece, then we need two empires between Babylon and Greece, hence the Medes and then the Persians.

The problems are 1) that in Daniel there is no separate Median empire and the Medes and the Persians are always considered together as a single political entity (for example, in 8:20 the ram with two horns is identified as the kings of Media and Persia, that is, the two together are a separate empire); and 2) it was not the Medes but the Medo-Persian empire that conquered Babylon, as the author of Daniel seems to know (the handwriting on the wall, remember, was interpreted to mean that Babylon would fall to the Medes and the Persians [5:28]). Darius is called "the Mede," but Daniel is clear that he is a ruler of the Persian Empire, not the Median Empire.

- v.6 The leopard with four wings and four heads to which dominion was given would then be Greece, an empire more extensive and powerful than any before it. The four heads probably reflect the four directions of the compass. From the perspective of Babylon, where Daniel was, the Greeks would rule to the north, south, east, and west. In any case, like the lion, the eagle, and the bear, the leopard is likewise a predator.

- v.7 The fourth beast is not described or identified in the form of any particular animal, though we read of its horns and, in v. 19, of its teeth of iron and claws of bronze. It is *different* from those that came before it; in a class all by itself. [Davis, 95] It is widely thought to be Rome – that is the typical, even the typical evangelical interpretation – but its uniqueness makes it also possible that it is meant to describe the final world empire, an empire that makes all human empires that went before it seem pale in comparison, without parallel in power and ruthlessness. [Veldkamp in Davis, 96]. Take the first three then not only as historical empires, succeeding one another in time, but as standing for all human political powers that would from time to time occupy a place on the world stage over the years of human history. If so, this last empire stands for that situation near the end of history when human evil will have reached its apex. The ten horns, 5 times the usual 2, would stand for the extraordinary, unparalleled, unprecedented power of this empire.
- v.8 In a similar way the little horn is a figure unprecedented in history both for his power and for his arrogance, as will be confirmed in vv. 24-25. The reader, or hearer, naturally wonders what will come next with this powerful figure holding sway over the world. You will appreciate why, through the ages, this “little horn” has been identified as the figure called in the NT by the apostle John the Anti-Christ, the figure Paul refers to in 2 Thessalonians 2 as the man of lawlessness, or the beast of whom we read in in chapters 17 and 18 of the book of Revelation.
- v.10 The scene now abruptly changes to the heavenly court with God himself present to render judgment upon the nations. The description remains highly figurative. God, the Jews well knew, is not an old man with white hair! On the other hand, while the empires of this world are pictured as malevolent beasts, we now have persons described. Our worries about the kingdoms of this world are allayed. God himself is about to speak and his great host awaits his orders. Here is power and authority that the kingdoms of the earth never dreamed of possessing. The powers of this world come and go; each falls and is replaced by another, but the time will come when all of that will be brought to a sudden halt!
- v.12 For all their apparent mastery of the world, the kingdoms and the little horn himself are swept away, as it were with a flick of the Almighty’s wrist! History has not yet come to an end, but the “season and a time” suggests that only a limited period of time remains.
- v.13 The act of “coming with the clouds of heaven” appears some 70 times in the Old Testament *and it always refers to the acts of a divine being*. Think of Mt. Sinai covered with a cloud when God descended to give the law or the Pillar of Cloud that led Israel through the wilderness. Or think of Psalm 68:4: “Sing to God...extol him who rides on the clouds – his name is the Lord...” Again, the ancient world used this same imagery. Baal was called the “Rider on the Clouds.” But here this figure is identified as “like a son of man.” Here we have a man who comes on the clouds!
- v.14 This divine/human figure is given a kingdom. Who can this be but the Lord Christ, God incarnate? No wonder the Lord so often refers to himself in the Gospels as “the son of man.” Indeed, “son of man” is the Lord’s favorite way of referring to himself in the

Gospels. Interestingly, that term virtually disappears after the resurrection. But during his ministry the son of man was so man-like that people refused to believe that he would come on the clouds. As Eugene Peterson reminds us, “This Son of Man has dinner with a prostitute, stops off for lunch with a tax-collector, wastes time blessing children when there were Roman legions to be chased from the land, heals unimportant losers and ignores high-achieving Pharisees and influential Sadducees.” [Cited in Duguid, 117-118] And, of course he was eventually hung on a Roman gibbet to die. Still he himself promised one day to come on the clouds to bring final judgment and salvation to the earth.

- v.20 As you may remember “the horn” is a well-established biblical image for power, but the lifted-up-horn symbolizes pride. Think of a great stag lifting up his horns. Here it is the wrong sort of pride: man lifting himself up before God. What are the three horns that fell before the other horn? It is noteworthy how little attention the commentaries pay to that question! I’m using about six or seven commentaries on Daniel, and only one of them really addresses that obvious question. You soon suspect that the reason they didn’t is because they haven’t the foggiest idea what the three horns symbolize! E.J. Young says simply that he doesn’t think the number needs to be pressed! It is a demonstration of the little horn’s power.
  
- v.25 “A time, times, and half a time” has, as you might expect, been given many different interpretations, including the three and a half years that we encounter in Revelation, half the period of the Great Tribulation. However, the phrase is very ambiguous, and a sounder interpretation is that the time of the kingdom of the little horn will seem like it will never end, but will, in fact, be cut off sooner than anyone thinks. [Keil in Longman, 190-191]
  
- v.28 Typical of other prophesies of this nature, the impact of the vision was unsettling. Great turmoil, terrible evil, deadly persecution of the saints, even their final vindication is described in ways that suggest cataclysmic upheavals, not a gentle and beautiful sunrise. The vindication of the saints will take place in the judgment of the world, a judgment characterized by terror, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. Tolkein coined a term to describe this: the *eucatastrophe*. “*eu*” is the Greek word for good; *euangelion* is thus the Greek word for good news, or gospel; so *eucatastrophe* would be the good catastrophe. Thus far the Word of God.

Have you noticed how preoccupied this younger generation seems to be with the end of the world? Whether as a result of the invasion of aliens, or nuclear destruction, or environmental catastrophe, one movie after another depicts the end, and always the end is the day of doom, of the triumph of evil, perhaps with one or two or a few human beings left to attempt to rebuild human life. The Bible talks about the coming doom, but it also talks about the coming triumph and salvation of a portion of the human race. The end of the world is the coming of the Lord. And that introduces our subject this evening.

What changes from chapter 6 to chapter 7 is not just the subject, though the subject of the vision in chapter 7 is certainly similar to that of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 (also highly

symbolic if not precisely the same form we find in chapter 7), *but the genre*. We move from narrative to prophecy and not just any sort of prophecy, but a very distinctive form of prophecy. That should not surprise or concern us. There are many literary genres in the Bible. We have narrative history, laws, hymns, love poems, an epic poem (Job), proverbs, sermons, letters, and various forms of prophecy. The genre of Daniel 7-12 is one form of biblical prophecy.

This genre now bears the name *apocalyptic*. It is derived from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, a word that simply means “revelation.” The term is taken from its use in the first verse of the book of Revelation, the title of which is literally *The Apocalypse (or Revelation) of St. John*. But, again, the term as it is used today refers not to any kind of divine revelation, but to a highly distinctive form of prophecy. This apocalyptic type of prophecy is found elsewhere in the Bible and in some other Jewish writings. These writings all share certain characteristics that justify their being grouped together as apocalyptic in style.

You will encounter the same word used in modern English and, interestingly, in much the same way in which the term is used in biblical scholarship. The dictionary defines “apocalyptic” as something – some word or some event – that forecasts or anticipates the end of the world, that forebodes imminent disaster or final doom. Well that is certainly characteristic of biblical apocalypses, though in the Bible apocalyptic literature not only deals with impending doom but with impending deliverance, salvation, and the consummation of redemption. Apocalyptic literature in the Bible trades in God’s ultimate and absolute triumph over his enemies and the enemies of his people and kingdom. Apocalyptic literature in the Bible deals with human evil and man’s rebellion against God, but it also peers behind the veil to see the spiritual forces of evil that dominate this world and take up into themselves man’s rebellion against God. A cosmic war stands behind human conflict both with God and among men. [Longman, 179]

But it is not just the subject matter that distinguishes apocalyptic literature, it is also its very distinctive style. Suddenly we find ourselves among strange beasts, beasts that are a combination of animals and bizarre in appearance – a lion with eagle’s wings, a leopard with four wings of a bird on its back and with four heads and iron teeth – the power of which images puzzles us still today, in large part because they trade in an iconography with which we are utterly unfamiliar. We know enough now about the ancient world to know that these beastly images would not have struck the original readers or hearers of these prophecies in nearly the same way as they strike us. These metaphors trade in common motifs of ancient near eastern literature and visual art and, in some cases, motifs found previously in the Bible. Think of Ezekiel’s visions or those of Zechariah, but also some of the metaphorical expressions to which we have already drawn attention, such as God ruling the sea, the horn, numbers as symbols, and so on.

For example, we also encounter here and elsewhere in apocalyptic literature what look like timetables, but they employ numbers that are used symbolically throughout the Bible and which, when taken literally, leave us unable to explain their meaning in any convincing way. Threes and sevens and tens, and multiples of them, are everywhere in this literature. When I was growing up, the dispensational eschatology of American evangelicalism – popularized in books such as Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* (a book that sold millions of copies) – took the ten horns in verse 8 as the ten members of what was then called the European Common Market. [I happen to know two people who came to Christ through reading *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Both of them would later repudiate the eschatology taught in that book, but at the time it was a means to encourage them for the first time in their lives to take seriously the message of the Bible and threat of divine judgment.] Indeed, in regard to this idea, Lindsey referred to Daniel 7 as the “greatest chapter in the Old Testament” (90) and took the ten horns to depict a renewed Roman empire. When Hal Lindsey wrote his book in the early 1970s there weren’t ten countries yet numbered among the Common Market’s members, but we were taught to expect the beginning of the end when the tenth one was added! Those ten European countries in a single “empire” would be the ten horns of Daniel 7 which would be followed by the little horn, which would be the Anti-Christ. However, when the EU burned right through ten nations and added more and more (there are today twenty-eight countries that belong to the EU) we stopped hearing about the ten horns as ten countries of the Common Market!

There are other such numbers in these visions. In chapter 9 we will read of the 2,300 morning and evenings and in chapter 9 of the seventy weeks which have spawned at least seventy different interpretations, even among men who share the same general outlook on prophecy!

I hope we have got beyond the practice of seeking to read our newspapers as commentary on Daniel 7 and other such passages in the Bible. Even great theologians have made this mistake. Jonathan Edwards did. So did Thomas Goodwin, one of the greatest of the English Puritans and Westminster divines. I have on my shelf his commentary on Revelation. Using material from Daniel 7 and from Revelation itself, Goodwin entered into a detailed calculation of the time of Christ’s coming again. He was cautious but said it would not surprise him if the Lord were return in 1666. Only missed it by 351 years, and counting!

Charles Spurgeon, who lived in a time when Christian people were making all sorts of speculations about the end of the world from Daniel 7 and like passages, had this to say in his own inimitable style.

“I am greedy after witnesses for the glorious gospel of the blessed God. O that Christ crucified were the universal burden of men of God. Your guess as the number of the beast, your Napoleonic speculations, your conjectures concerning a personal anti-Christ – forgive me, I count them but mere bones for dogs; while men are dying and hell is filling, it seems to me the veriest drivel to be muttering about Armageddon at Sebastopol, or Sadowa or Sedan, and peeping between the folded leaves of destiny to discover the fate of Germany. Blessed are those who read and hear the words of the prophecy of Revelation, but the like blessing has evidently not fallen on those who pretend to expound it, for generation after generation of them have been proved to be in error by the mere lapse of time, and the present race will follow to the same inglorious sepulcher.” [In Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 261-262]

*Here is my point: so much of this resulted from a failure to respect the genre of apocalyptic literature.* Here is Dr. Packer on the Bible’s apocalyptic literature.

“The apocalyptic idiom – a highly imaginative, imagistic, symbolic style that had been developed for dramatizing the conflict between God and chaotic tyrannical evil – was

well understood by [its] original readers and is well explained in present-day commentaries.” [J.I. Packer, *Truth and Power*, 158]

The fact is, it is in these visions – especially in Daniel, in Ezekiel, and in Revelation – that for long ages believers have typically found their arguments with one another, *in large part because they have not based their interpretations on an understanding of Daniel’s visions as species of apocalyptic literature*. The visions are so figurative that read in a more literal way a vast array of interpretations become possible. And it is partly because of the unending controversy that nowadays many Christians simply skip them, pretty sure that we don’t really know what they mean and so they aren’t missing anything of any practical use. Ralph Davis, the PCA OT prof. and sometime pastor, whose short commentary on Daniel is such a pleasure to read not only for its insight but for its wit, urges you not to give up so easily. In fact, he uses an illustration to prove that difficulties of understanding haven’t deterred you in other ways and so shouldn’t deter you here either. After first acknowledging his fear that he will be accused of sexism, he writes:

“If before marriage you (I speak here of males) imagine that you have begun to understand the female, you are incredibly naïve; if after marriage you think you can divine the female, you are clearly deluded; if after years of happily married life you dream that at last you can fathom the female persona, you are utterly hopeless. And yet...none of that kept you from marriage. Neither should the mysteries of Daniel 7-12 keep you from ploughing on through the book.” [93]

But actually, we are not left to attempt a stab in the dark. We appreciate the nature of apocalyptic literature far better today than we did in centuries past. As has been said of the book of Revelation, so we might say of Daniel 7-12, that it is a picture book rather than a code book. We have not a code to be deciphered, not some kind of explicit prose description of events as they will unfold in the world; rather we have these dramatic pictures of the future. And the pictures that are painted here are pictures drawn from the iconography of the ancient world. That is, we need to appreciate the literary and artistic background of this literature, just as, for example, we needed to understand the imagery of the Song of Songs before we could understand what that book is about.

If Daniel were written in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. – as we believe it was – then the visions of chapters 7-12 are some of the earliest examples of apocalyptic writing. There are some similar passages in Ezekiel. Most apocalyptic writings are Jewish works dating from the period between the end of the OT and the appearance of the Lord Jesus. Think of 1 Enoch, the Book of Jubilees, the Psalms of Solomon, the Assumption of Moses, The Martyrdom of Isaiah, and the like. Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls have apocalyptic features. In other words, it was a school of writing well known and well understood by its readers and its hearers.

We find this kind of literature in the New Testament as well; in the Lord’s apocalypse, what is called the Olivette Discourse, in Matthew 24 or Mark 13, some say in Paul’s prophecy in 2 Thessalonians 2, and, of course, the book of Revelation which is a typical apocalypse in literary form. We also know why this literary form was employed. It was familiar to the original readers and as a form it served so well to make the great point being made. Biblical apocalypses, of

course, are more chaste, that is, they are not marked by the mistakes or the extravagances of the non-biblical works written in this genre.

I think we now know that we are not from these visions to count up the numbers and figure out precisely when the prophetic clock will begin to tick so that we will know we are in the last days of the world. Clearly the vision Daniel saw and the account of it in Daniel 7 was not written for the last generation of saints who would live on the earth before the return of Christ. Think about it. Even Daniel's contemporaries could do little or nothing with these prophesies of coming empires. They would be dead and gone long before Greece arrived on the scene. And today we know of a great many other empires than those mentioned in Daniel 7. They come and they go until the last one: that is the point! And that point is what mattered for Daniel's contemporaries and what matters for every generation of believers. It concerns the great sweep of the future, *the meaning of the future, and, especially, the ultimate outcome of human history – judgment and final redemption.*

Apocalyptic is a form of writing intended to comfort and to encourage God's people when they have been put under oppression, when they are despised and rejected by the world, a world that to them is beast-like, rapacious, and cruel, and seemingly so much more powerful than they. The Jews in Daniel's day and the Christians in John's day are precisely the sort of people for which apocalyptic prophecy was intended. What is significant about the visions in Daniel 7-12 is that they are all concerned *with the place of God's people in the march of history and their certain vindication at the end of time.* But the picture of their place and their future given here is not sentimental. Apocalyptic teaches them how hard their lot in this world can be. It knows that they face the wrath of both the kingdom of the evil one and its minions in this world. They know that they will suffer and die for the sake of their faith in God.

But what apocalyptic also does is powerfully to remind them that through it all, through all their suffering and loss, God is still on his throne, history is still moving toward its appointed goal, the saints are still eternally secure, and the wicked are being reserved for judgment. It is not surprising, for example, that the clearest statement of the final judgment of the wicked in the OT is found in Daniel 12:1-3. The cosmic battle, the impending judgment, and the eventual triumph of the kingdom of God, *these are the subjects of biblical apocalyptic* and virtually its only subjects. That is not to say that there isn't specific prophecy contained in these visions – we have spoken of the empires that succeed one another in ancient near eastern history – indeed, the forecast of the nearer future is sufficiently precise that it has forced unbelieving scholarship to date Daniel late enough so that his prophesies could have been written *after* the events they purport to predict. Such predictions, verified by events, serve to confirm the confidence of God's people in the prophecy of the more distant future. But the purpose of even more specific prophesies of events soon to come is to serve the great themes; to prove that despite appearances God is in control; and that history is moving along a course charted for it by the Ancient of Days.

There is nothing in these apocalypses, of course, that can't be found in more straightforward biblical teaching. For example, the Lord Jesus himself taught his disciples that they would suffer fierce persecution, but that they must stand fast because the faithful would be vindicated and the wicked would be judged. Paul and Peter say the same things repeatedly. But the apocalyptic form of this teaching adds the emotive power of strong images and symbols, dramatic accounts



of historic upheavals, and a memorable picture of the end of the world – something like the great painting that Michelangelo has on the front wall of the Sistine Chapel, *The Last Judgment*. Anybody who has seen that painting remembers it. Apocalyptic is very like that.

So let no one among us say that we don't need or can't profit from such apocalyptic writing. Our problem, yours and mine, is that far too much of the time we accept the world as it is, fit ourselves into it, are not terribly concerned about its indifference to God or its practice of the favorite sins of a particular time and place. We are not alert to the cosmic battle that is raging around us. How many days have passed since your last serious thought about the fact that you're surrounded by demons who are exercising an influence on what's going on in this world? We do not feel the weight of the spiritual death that is occurring on all sides every day. And we are not longing, as we should be, for the consummation of all things and the historic and ultimate vindication of the kingdom of God. Other Christians around this world this very night are longing for those days, because they're living in exactly those circumstances for which apocalyptic literature was designed. No Christian can think it proper to make peace with this lion, or this bear, or this leopard, or the ten horns. And no Christian should ever forget the Ancient of Days who sits on a throne of fiery flames, which moves on wheels of burning fire. Life is serious business: serious for the suffering of the saints and serious for the final judgment of the wicked. But the world is utterly unaware of this. It cares nothing for it. Each empire is consumed with its own prosperity, its own peace and happiness. Then it is overcome by another as the world turns. And so it will be until the final rebellion and the coming of the Son of Man.

We read that Daniel was troubled by his thoughts. He wasn't troubled because he was finding it difficult to work out all the details of an end-time scenario. He was troubled because of this forecast of the trials that awaited the church of God; because of the long years that remained of this world's rebellion against God, and because he felt the pain and sorrow of the wicked being brought to ruin. It was hard to take all of it in as powerful as the vision had been.

We know of God's love for us. We know of the sacrifice of our Savior. We know of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We know of the life we are called to live in this world. But in a world such as ours, in a world of evil and rebellion against God, we must also know – and a great many Christians in our world today are desperate to be reminded – that the living God is, if I may quote the *Bhagavad Gita*, the “shatterer of worlds.” That God is our God, who makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind! [Psalm 104:3-4] Life is war and God, our God, will be the victor!