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The Little Horn

Daniel 8

Introduction

What would you do if you had the chance to find out the future? Would you find out next week's lottery numbers? Or perhaps see what companies were doing well in 20 years time? Would you inquire as to the state of the country, or look in on relatives to see how they fare? Maybe you'd even look yourself up to see your own situation.

There have been many books written with this idea of travelling into the future and back again, about whether we could then change the future, or if was set in stone. Or even if there are many futures, each based on choices we make today.

It's not really a scenario we have to face though. Or is it? Do we have a source that points out future events that is reliable and clear? Well, the chapter we're looking at today was so clear about the next few hundred years that most modern scholars will tell you it was written much later than it says. Daniel was around in the 6th century BC, and the vision we read was said to be in the 3rd year of Belshazzar, so around 540BC. However if you look up the book of Daniel in Wikipedia it says it is a "2nd century BC biblical apocalypse with a 6th century BC setting". The predictions it makes about world events are so accurate that there's no way they could have been written by Daniel.

Unless God revealed them.

Structure

Let's look at the passage. We find Daniel 3 years into Belshazzar's reign, and a couple of years after his last vision, which you looked at last week as you studied chapter 7. There Daniel saw a vision of 4 beasts, representing Babylon, MedoPersia, Greece and Rome. He was assured that God had a plan for his people to eventually inherit the land and live there forever.

Chapter 8 presents a similar vision, a picture of empires succeeding other empires. Daniel has the vision, and then has it explained to him by the angel Gabriel. The first two parts are crystal clear, but the third part is a bit trickier to interpret.

Medo-Persia

In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. I watched the ram as it charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great. [Daniel 8 v 1-4]

The setting is important here. Daniel has this vision in the 3rd year of Belshazzar's reign, so it's still in the time of the Babylonian empire. God's people are captive in Babylon and long for the day when they will return to Israel. However in his vision, Daniel is in the city of Susa, by the Uлай Canal. In 20 years time this city is going to become the capital of the Medo-Persian empire. It's the setting of the book of Esther. And so it's clear even without the help of Gabriel, that what Daniel is seeing here is the rise of this empire.

Daniel sees a ram with two horns. In the Bible the horn is often used as a symbol of power and authority. Here we have two horns for Media and Persia, with Persia the second horn, starting later but becoming greater. The Mede and Persian armies swept westwards into Babylon, Syria, Egypt and Greece, to the west, north and south as the vision said. Over a period of 200 years it ruled a massive area.

Greece

But even the biggest empire comes to an end, and Daniel saw that happening in the next part of his vision:

As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. It came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at it in great rage. I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power. The goat became very great, but at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven. [Daniel 8 v 5-8]

As the ram was Medo-Persia, so the goat was Greece. And Greece was going to come swiftly. Daniel says it crossed the whole earth without touching the ground. It would battle fiercely against Media and Persia, and shatter them, building a vast empire of its own in amazingly quick time. On its head was a prominent horn, a mighty leader, and it's hard to see that this could be anyone else than Alexander the Great.

In fact there is a story told in the histories of the Jewish writer Josephus, that when Alexander came through Palestine, battling at Tyre, he came to Jerusalem. The priest there showed him the book of Daniel, and Alexander identified himself as the great horn of the goat. Now Josephus isn't scripture, and the story may not be true, but Josephus presents it as a real event, and what we're looking at is a striking prediction of the Greek empire, 200 years before it existed.

The final part of this section talks about the great horn being broken off, and four horns growing up in its place. In truth, Alexander's life was cut short, and he was replaced not by a single successor but by four generals who each commanded a part of the empire: Egypt in the south, Persia in the east, Macedonia in the west and Thrace in the north. These provinces changed as they fought against each other but this was the general pattern.

The Little Horn

Now it gets a little less clear:

Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the Lord; it took away the daily sacrifice from the Lord, and his sanctuary was thrown down. Because of rebellion, the Lord's people and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground. [Daniel 8 v 9-12]

So, out of one of the 4 parts of the Greek empire comes another power, or possibly a person. This “little horn” starts off small but gains in power, and gains land to the south, the east and towards Palestine, the “Beautiful Land”. Who are the host of the heavens, some of whom are thrown down by the little horn? Are they angels? Or God’s people? Who is the commander of the army of the Lord? Jesus? It seems that God’s people are being chastised for their rebellion - when did this happen, or has it still to happen?

Gabriel gives us further details, but doesn’t really tie down who this is:

“In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue, will arise. He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy those who are mighty, the holy people. He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power. [Daniel 8 v 23-25]

That helps a bit. It gives us further information. But it’s still not decided. Many Christians over the ages have made suggestions. Here are the most popular:

Antiochus Epiphanes

Antiochus became ruler of the Seleucid empire, the easternmost of the four Greek regions. He named himself Epiphanes as he thought he was “God Manifest”, though some of his peers called him Antiochus the Mad. He scattered money to the common people, held massive banquets for the nobles, in an attempt to ingratiate himself with the people. The previous rulers of the Seleucids had control over Jerusalem, but had generally let the Jews carry on with their own culture. However this guy was different - he persecuted the Jews, slaughtered thousands of them when they rebelled, and sacrificed a pig in the temple to desecrate it, stopping the daily sacrifices for a period.

This all sounds very similar to the picture in Daniel’s vision. In fact when a voice asks how long the sanctuary will be surrendered, in verse 14 Daniel gets a specific answer: 2300 evenings and mornings. Now with Antiochus there was a time when the sanctuary was reconsecrated and the sacrifices were restored. Commentators are divided as to whether counting back 2300 days, or 1150 days (2300 mornings and evenings) gets to the point where the sacrifices were stopped.

Another problem here is that Gabriel tells Daniel that the vision “concerns the time of the end.” in verse 17. Antiochus Epiphanes died in 164BC. Was that really the time of the end?

The Roman Empire

Another suggestion is that the little horn is the Roman Empire. It starts off small but grows to become mighty. Chapter 7 talked about the fourth empire, but chapter 8 didn't mention it specifically, so maybe this is it. Rome didn't grow out of one of the four Greek regions, but one of them was an ally to Rome as it expanded its territory. And Rome certainly took over and persecuted the Israelites. We can say that the sanctuary was thrown down when the Romans destroyed the temple in AD70, and we could say they took their stand against the Prince of Princes when they crucified Jesus.

The Antichrist

Others have suggested that the events around the little horn are related to the time near Jesus' return. The little horn will come out of a ten kingdom empire, as in chapter 7, he will set himself up as a mighty ruler, challenging the power of God, and taking over the worship of God's people for himself.

Some have suggested that the 2300 days are actually prophetic years, and that Jesus' return will happen when these years are up. Be very careful of predicting Jesus' return, though. Many predicted it for the first millennium, many for 1844 (the “great disappointment”), some for 1988 (a generation after the founding of the nation of Israel in 1948), and of course many for the year 2000. But Jesus himself said that no one knows the time, so it's not just wrong but disobedient of us to predict the date of the second coming.

Why?

Among all these predictions, facts and suggestions, there is one question we haven't looked at yet: why?

Why did God give this vision to Daniel?

Remember Daniel had been forcibly taken from his homeland, and had lived in Babylon for nigh on 70 years. He is perhaps wondering whether the Jewish people will ever return to Jerusalem, and worship in the temple again. Perhaps he is wondering how sure he can be of God's plans in the world.

In this vision God is showing Daniel that he is in control. He knows how great empires will wax and wane, and he knows the details of how these things will happen. It is a fearsome vision: we often forget that these great changes in power involve great battles and death in untold quantity. But ultimately God is in control.

He also shows Daniel that things are going to be difficult. The Jews are going to be persecuted for a long time ahead. And the reason behind that is their own rebellion. They have turned against God and so they are suffering his discipline.

But discipline is always carried out with the aim of restoration. And that's firmly set in the picture Daniel sees. There will be a day when the temple is restored, when God's people are able to worship him and live in peace in the land that is theirs.

And the promises are the same for us today. We don't know what lies ahead, but we do know that God holds the future. We know that we aren't guaranteed an easy ride. In fact we can be pretty sure of storms. But we know that he is in the boat with us. And we know that our destination is secure. We are heaven-bound if Christ is our saviour. We can look forward to his return, but whether that happens in our lifetime or not, we have a future in eternity with him.