

Christ the King 2015

In the second century before Christ an apocalyptic prophet has a vision that lifts him and his despondent people from the valley of the shadow of death to Hope writ large. Once again the small and insignificant people and land of Israel and its capital, Jerusalem, were being crushed by the great ravenous beasts of their age, the imperial powers that had declared war on the Jewish people. The worst of these was the Seleucid king, Antiochus, who liked to be known as Theos Epiphanes, God made manifest – though also known out of the earshot of spies as Epimanes, the Mad One, for he was the Nero of his time.

In the year 168BC Antiochus was seeking to wage war on Egypt but was stopped in his tracks by an envoy from Rome who famously drew a line in the sand and made Antiochus remove his threats of war before he was allowed to cross it. Humiliated, the great beast stalked away, rampaging back to Syria and taking out all his anger and venom on the people and city of the Holy Land. The second book of Maccabees says:

Raging like a wild animal, he set out from Egypt and took Jerusalem by storm. He ordered his soldiers to cut down without mercy those whom they met and to slay those who took refuge in their houses. There was a massacre of young and old, a killing of women and children, a slaughter of virgins and infants. In the space of three days, eighty thousand were lost, forty thousand meeting a violent death, and the same number being sold into slavery.

He proceeded to banish Jewish religion and practice and instead the cult of Zeus was established in the Jerusalem temple. Those who would not conform were put to death. They were called by a new term – the holy ones, the hagioi, the saints of the Most High.

In the midst of this apocalyptic suffering, a prophet has a vision. The horn of the beast made war with the saints, he writes, 'and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgement was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints received the kingdom.'

There is a little mystery here – in fact in this strange language of apocalyptic there are plenty of whopping great mysteries here. There are meant to be. This apocalypse in Daniel, like that of St John a few hundred years later, is written in the time of great hardship and persecution. It is written in code, written so that only those who need to understand do understand - the saints, the holy ones, the ones who are suffering great persecutions but are holding fast for their faith and for the truth. In both Daniel's vision and John's there are great beasts who are staking the earth devouring those in their way. These are human kingdoms: in John's case the Roman Empire with the horns of the beast representing its emperors; in Daniel's case there are four beast representing the four empires that successively held sway over the middle-east from the time of the Babylonian exile where the historic Daniel lives until the reign of Antiochus in the early second century when these prophecies are finally written down. Before and in the middle of our OT reading – there is a bit left out – we find the four great beasts rising out of the great sea successively terrorising the earth. It concludes with a description of the fourth beast:

After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrible and dreadful and exceedingly strong; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue 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. 9 As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat;

The vision of the Ancient of Days is a vision of a greater reality. Whilst on earth these terrible things are happening, in Heaven is a scene that provides hope and reassurance to the prophet and through him to the saints and with them to us. On earth are the great powers: the four beasts in Daniel's vision are the Empires of Babylon, Persia, Ptolemaic Egypt, and the Seleucids who ruled by the late 3rd century from Syria. Yes, it was out of Syria that the latest beast arose and wreaked his havoc. It was out of Syria that a seemingly unstoppable force arose, causing terror, slaughter and distress amongst the nations.

With one sweep of his tale he beast seemingly destroyed Israel, then people of God; worse, for them, insulted their God and desecrated their temple.

In the midst of this turmoil what does the prophet see?

A great courtroom, the judge takes his seat, judging over how many people? At first the prophet says a million – a thousand thousand – and then ten thousand times ten thousand, 100 million. That is, in his day, everyone who had ever lived and more. The books are opened – the evidence is presented; the court sits in judgment.

It is the faith of Daniel – and the faith of John and the rest of the NT – that there is an ultimate judgement, that in the end evil will not triumph, that God is judge and Lord over all and all in the end will be subject to his rule and his justice. I guess that is easy to believe when by and large justice seems to be done on earth; when those who do wrong are brought to book and the virtuous are honoured. It must be much harder to believe when all hell breaks loose, when all that we regard as worthy of honour is trampled upon, despised and scorned; when the beasts are on the march and the innocent are killed and evil triumphs. Perhaps in such circumstances it is only those with extraordinary vision and insight who are able to keep the hope of the rest of us alive – the Daniels, the Johns.

The second part of Daniel's vision is even more extraordinary. One like a son of man comes with the clouds of heaven, is presented before the throne and receives an everlasting dominion, a kingdom that will never be destroyed.

Now this figure is partly explained by Daniel just a few verses later:

*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;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them*

In other words just as the four beasts are representative of nations, kingdoms, so this fifth figure is a representative one, except this is not a malign beastly figure but one that is human through and through, humane, all that we would hope for and admire. So is this Israel, and particularly, holy Israel, its saints, the ones who have gone through the great persecution now exalted and given authority over the nations?

Well, yes, but the great mystery is that the four beasts were nations, empires, but they were also their kings, such as Antiochus the wild animal raging and taking Jerusalem by storm. The king personified his people, so the king is sometimes the horn of the beast but sometimes the beast itself. And this fifth beast, the one who is not beast but human and humane, he is also both a people and their king. That was certainly how this was read in the centuries between Antiochus and the coming of the one we call Christ, Messiah, King. That's why this prophecy, as others in the OT, was,

as it were, hanging in the air in the early first century. That's why there were a whole succession of Jewish figures in the first century claiming to be the Messiah. None stood the test of time, all were very soon discredited and forgotten – all bar one, the one who in John's vision 'is coming with the clouds', Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.