

3 Daniel 6-8

6:1–28. This passage, which is similar in parts to chapter 3, begins by showing how difficult it was for the Jews to stay true to their religion in the midst of a pagan society (vv. 1–18); then we see how God comes to their rescue (vv. 19–24); finally, the pagan king acknowledges the God of Israel (vv. 25–28). As in chapter 5, Daniel is center-stage; in fact, his companions are not even mentioned. The episode has no particular connection with the previous ones; in fact, it seems to be a unit in its own right; it rounds off the part of the book dealing with Daniel at the court of Babylon. The fact that the story involves Darius the Mede, a king unknown to historical scholarship (see pp. 794f, above), reinforces the impression that this is a moral tale designed to get across the message that God helps those who strive to obey the precepts of the Jewish religion.

6:1–18. Daniel seems to be very much part of the social and political world of Babylon; thanks to his skill and loyalty, he is second only to the king. The plot against him may have been hatched out of jealousy, but the fact that he was a foreigner and a Jew probably did not help. His enemies set a sort of legal trap for Daniel. The king in his vanity issues a decree which, for a period of thirty days, makes him the only god there is. It is a decree that even he cannot revoke—much as he would wish to do so, in order to liberate Daniel from its penalty. Here Daniel the Jew is not being obliged to do something against his religion: he is being required to refrain from doing something that his religion enjoins—to pray to God facing towards Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kings 8:48). Daniel’s opponents have managed to manipulate the king and change the law in such a way that they can accuse Daniel of breaking the law for religious reasons; he cannot be faulted on any other score.

When Daniel learned about the interdict, he did not change his standard pattern of prayer (v. 11); there is a lesson here for Christians, as the Fathers point out. Origen, for example, says: “The commandment to *pray without ceasing* (cf. Lk 18:1) can be understood and fulfilled only if we believe that the whole of man’s life is a single, unbroken prayer. One part of this long prayer of life is what we call prayer, and we should pray no less than three times a day, as is made clear in the book of Daniel, who prayed three times a day even in the midst of great dangers” (*De oratione*, 12, 2).

6:19–24. Through divine intervention (once again by means of an angel: cf. 3:26), no harm comes to Daniel from the lions. It is as if Daniel is innocent in the sight of God—a point not lost on the king (v. 22) either; in fact, it spurs him to take control of the situation, assert his rights, and see that justice is done (vv. 23–24). Daniel’s fidelity to his religion, and the fact that God protected him in his ordeal, expose the perversity of the king’s edict, and cause the king to right the wrong he has done. The sacred writer points out why God intervened miraculously—

because Daniel “trusted in his God” (v. 23). Daniel’s rivals were punished in line with the customs of the time, that is, they were punished very severely.

St Augustine comments that the lions refrained from harming Daniel because he was faithful to God: “Submit to the one who has power over you, and you will be raised above those who once held you in thrall. In committing sin, man places above himself what should always be beneath him; he submits to things that are less than him. [...] Acknowledge the one who has power over you, so that the things that are below you will see where you stand above them. For when Daniel acknowledged the power of the Lord God, the lions saw the superiority of Daniel over them and did not touch him” (*In epistolam Ioannis*, 8).

6:25–28. The king readily issues a decree that goes against his earlier one (cf. 6:9); the tenor of it is like that issued by Nebuchadnezzar in 4:1–3. So, both the Babylonian king and Darius the Mede acknowledged the God of the Jews as the one true God whose kingdom lasts forever; and they reached that point thanks to the wisdom that God gave the Jews (particularly Daniel) and to the exemplary fidelity of the Jews to their religion in the midst of trials.

7:1–12:13. Up to the end of chapter 6, Daniel has been the interpreter of kings’ dreams; now his own dreams are interpreted for him by an angel or heavenly being: the interpreter explains dreams (chaps. 7–8), the meaning of Scripture (chap. 9), and a vision (chaps. 10–12); and Daniel himself notes it all down.

Daniel had announced to Nebuchadnezzar the end of time as part of the interpretation of his dream (cf. 2:28); now Daniel is told when it will happen (cf. 12:5–12); for him (cf. 2:28); he is given a more specific revelation in which the figure of the tyrannical Antiochus IV (described here symbolically) is depicted as the epitome of evil and his death will mark the end of the present age (cf. 11:45–12:1). Earlier, Daniel’s wisdom was seen as a divine gift to be used for the benefit of foreign kings; now it is depicted as coming from a revelation in which God speaks to Daniel through heavenly messengers and tells him about the meaning of human history—a revelation that he must commit to writing, as a source of comfort and hope for the chosen people. “Revelation has set within history a point of reference which cannot be ignored if the mystery of human life is to be known. Yet this knowledge refers back constantly to the mystery of God which the human mind cannot exhaust but can only receive and embrace in faith. Between these two poles, reason has its own specific field in which it can enquire and understand, restricted only by its finiteness before the infinite mystery of God” (John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 14).

7:1–28. This chapter marks the end of the part of the book written in Aramaic; in it we again find elements seen in chapter 2 (where the Aramaic part began); these include: the arrangement of history into four periods (symbolized there by metals, here by beasts) and the establishment of an everlasting kingdom at the end. Thus, the chapter closes the Aramaic section and acts as a kind of introduction to the chapters (in Hebrew) in which Daniel receives and writes down divine revelations. Chapter 8 is written in Hebrew and it explains chapter 7; and this pattern continues: chapter 9 is explained by chapter 10; and 11 by 12. Daniel first outlines his dream or vision, and it is then interpreted by an angelic being. In this chapter the content of the dream is given in vv. 1–14, and its interpretation in vv. 15–28. Vision and interpretation constitute a single event, an account of which Daniel writes down, as he mentions at the start (cf. v. 1) and finish (cf. v. 28). Daniel’s “signature” at beginning and end confirms the truth of his vision and the truthfulness of what he has written for the reader.

7:1–14. In chapter 5 the picture drawn of Belshazzar suggested that he stood figuratively for the sacrilegious King Antiochus IV. It is not surprising, then, that this dream of Daniel’s is set in the first year of Belshazzar’s reign, given that the climax of the prophecy (the little horn) concerns Antiochus IV. God is going to intervene definitively when irreligion is at its worst. There are two scenes in the vision—the beasts coming out of the sea (vv. 2–8) and the divine court and judgment (vv. 9–14).

7:2–8. The Great Sea (the Mediterranean: v. 2), out of which the beasts arise, stands for the world of gloom and chaos. Although earlier prophets did use animals as symbols for empires (a crocodile for Egypt, cf. Ezek 32; an eagle or a monster for Babylon, cf. Ezek 17:3; Jer 51:34), the winged beasts of Daniel’s vision are reminiscent of Mesopotamian statues. The lion with eagle’s wings stands for Nebuchadnezzar; a proud man, he was brought low and later given back his reason (4:16, 34); the empire of the Medes is depicted as a bear ready to attack, and that of the Persians as a leopard, fleet of foot. The fourth beast resembles no animal, but its teeth of iron show it to be the Greek empire of Alexander the Great and his successors (cf. 2:40). Of those successors, (symbolized by the horns), attention is focused on Antiochus IV, the horn with eyes that speaks blasphemy (cf. vv. 8, 25). The gravity of those challenges to God’s authority will be underlined in Revelation 13:5 in its description of the beast that is given power by the dragon. The worst sin of the powers of the world is their opposition to God and his laws.

Interpreting the words of this passage as a prophecy in the strict sense, that is, as a prediction of something that will happen in the future, some Fathers read the last of the horns as being the Antichrist of whom the Revelation to John will have much to say (cf. Rev. 13:11–18; 17:16; 19:19–21).

7:9–14. Divine judgment is passed on the kingdoms in this scene. God is depicted as being seated on a throne in heaven, his glory flashing out and angels all around. Judgment is about to take place, and it will be followed by execution of the sentence. The books (v. 10) contain all the actions of men (cf. Jer 17:1; Mal 3:16; Ps 56:8; Rev 20:12). The seer is shown history past (not laid out according to chronology: all the empires are included in one glance), and he notes that a more severe sentence is passed on the blasphemous horn than on the other beasts. They had their lives extended (v. 12), that is, their deprivation of power did not spell the end; but the little horn is destroyed forthwith. “Following in the steps of the prophets and John the Baptist, Jesus announced the judgment of the Last Day in his preaching (cf. Dan 7:10; Joel 3–4; Mal 3:19; Mt 3:7–12)” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 678).

The one “like a son of man” who comes with the clouds of heaven and who, after the judgment, is given everlasting dominion over all the earth, is the very antithesis of the beasts. He has not risen from a turbulent sea like them; there is nothing ferocious about him. Rather, he has been raised up by God (he comes with the clouds of heaven) and he shares the human condition. The dignity of all mankind is restored through this son of man’s triumph over the beasts. This figure, as we will discover later, stands for “the people of the saints of the Most High” (7:27), that is, faithful Israel. However, he is also an individual (just as the winged lion was an individual, and the little horn), and insofar as he is given a kingdom, he is a king. What we have here is an individual who represents the people. In Jewish circles around the time of Christ, this “son of man” was interpreted as being the Messiah, a real person (cf. *Book of the Parables of Enoch*); but it was a title that became linked to the sufferings of the Messiah and to his resurrection from the dead only when Jesus Christ applied it to himself in the Gospel. “Jesus accepted Peter’s profession of faith, which acknowledged him to be the Messiah, by announcing the imminent Passion of the Son of Man (cf. Mt 16:23). He unveiled the authentic content of his messianic kingship both in the transcendent identity of the Son of Man ‘who came down from heaven’ (Jn 3:13; cf. Jn 6:62; Dan 7:13), and in his redemptive mission as the suffering Servant: ‘The Son

of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt 20:28; cf. Is 53:10–12)" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 440).

When the Church proclaims in the Creed that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, she is saying that it was to Christ that dominion was given: "Being seated at the Father's right hand signifies the inauguration of the Messiah's kingdom, the fulfilment of the prophet Daniel's vision concerning the Son of man: 'To him was given domination and glory and 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' (Dan 7:14). After this event the apostles became witnesses of the 'kingdom [that] will have no end' (Nicene Creed)" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 664).

7:15–28. The interpretation focuses on the protagonists in the period when the book of Daniel was written—those to whom the kingdom will be given, that is, faithful Jews or "saints of the Most High" (vv. 18, 27); and the horn that grows from the fourth beast, Antiochus IV, who blasphemes against God, persecutes those who keep the Law and suppresses sabbaths and feasts (v. 25; cf. 1 Mac 1:41–52). But the persecution will only go on for a certain time—three and a half "times", that is, half seven, which symbolizes completeness. The vision and its interpretation alarm Daniel on account of the sufferings that his people are undergoing and will undergo in the future; but he also says that "I kept the matter in my mind" (v. 28): his faith and hope are not affected.

8:1–27. Daniel continues his account and now tells about another vision which, like the previous one, took place in the reign of King Belshazzar (8:1–14); and then he records the interpretation, provided this time by the angel Gabriel (8:15–27). This new vision, developing the last part of the previous one, shows the empire of the Medes and Persians being dislodged by the Greeks, and then the evil doings of Antiochus IV. The symbolism of the horned animals comes in again but the focus has shifted to when the end will come for Antiochus IV (cf. 8:13–14). This helps to strengthen the morale of those who are being persecuted.

8:1–14. The start is reminiscent of the vision that Ezekiel had on the banks of a river (cf. Ezek 1:1–3), although here (v. 2) it is not clear whether the vision takes place after Daniel is brought to Susa, or whether he simply sees himself in Susa during the vision (the latter is more likely). It

is significant that prior to the fall of the Babylonian empire the vision relates to one of the cities where the Persian kings used to reside. That serves to accentuate the prophetic character of the vision which will go on to refer to the Persian period, for it begins with the fall of the Median-Persian empire. That is clearly the kingdom meant by the ram with the two horns; and the he-goat is the Greek empire; this will be confirmed by the interpretation (cf. 8:21). There is a theory (not very well founded) that these particular animals were chosen as symbols of those kingdoms because, according to a common belief, Persia was under the zodiacal sign of Aries, and Syria (the land of the Seleucid Greeks) under that of Capricorn. According to the Septuagint (but not the Hebrew, or the Theodotion text), the ram charges in all four directions (v. 4)—symbolizing its remarkable and rapid expansion. But it is from the west that Alexander the Great comes—a leader remarkable for his lightning conquests and his mighty army (v. 5): in the year 333 bc he defeated Xerxes at Issus.

Verse 8 clearly has to do with the death of Alexander and the division of his empire among four Greek generals, the Diadoches—Macedonia for Philip, Asia Minor for Antigonus, Syria for Seleucus and Egypt for Ptolemy. The passage then goes on to describe the doings of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (vv. 9–11), making clear references to his campaigns against Egypt, Persia and “the glorious land”, that is, Israel (v. 9; cf. 11:16), and to his profanation of the temple, which took place in 176 bc (v. 12). Verses 10–11, however, can be interpreted as saying: 1) that, after destroying the gods of other peoples, Antiochus dared to attack even the true God and his temple, or 2) that he attacked the people of Israel (whose members would be the “stars”, as in 12:3), killing some of them, including the high priest Onias III in 171, for whose death Antiochus was held responsible (cf. 2 Mac 4:30, 38). This second interpretation comes from 8:24–25.

The number of evenings and mornings that all this persecution must still last (v. 14) is something that heaven is well aware of, for it is all laid down and discussed among the angels, here described as “holy ones” (cf. 12:6–7 and note **h**). The figure is somewhat puzzling. If “evenings and mornings” refers to the evening and morning sacrifices, then it becomes 1,150 days; but if evening-and-morning means a day, then it means 2,300 days. In neither case does the figure tie in with the three and a half “times” or years (which would be 1,260 days and whose symbolism is clear: cf. 7:25). Maybe the intention is to leave the reader vague as to when

exactly the end will come (which is what happens in 12:11–12), or it may be saying that the period can be shortened.

8:15–27. For Daniel (called here “son of man”: v. 17; that is, a man) to be able to understand them, the two heavenly beings have the appearance of men and speak like men. And, when Revelation reaches its climax God will make himself truly man—amazing condescension on God’s part, for “the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 13).

The angel Gabriel appears in the Bible for the first time here; he is charged with making God’s purposes known. This is his specific mission, as we will be told later in the book (cf. 9:21) and as is clear from the New Testament, when he delivers messages to Zechariah (Lk 1:11) and Mary (Lk 1:26). As regards angels (cf. the note on Ezek 23:20–33), St Gregory the Great says: “The word ‘angel’ refers to the function of the spiritual being, not its nature. All the holy spirits in heaven are spiritual beings, but they cannot always be called angels, because they are only angels when they perform the work of messengers” (*Homiliae in Evangelia*, 2, 34, 8). And St Jerome comments: “Gabriel is entrusted with this task because the vision concerns the battles and struggles among kings and the succession of kings, and Gabriel has charge of battles and disputes. The translation of ‘Gabriel’ is ‘strength’ or ‘strong man of God’. Therefore, when the Lord was about to be born, to declare war on the devil and all evil spirits and to triumph over the whole world, the angel Gabriel was sent to Zechariah and Mary” (*Commentarii in Daniele*, 8, 16).

The interpretation of the vision adds nothing to what its symbolism tells us; however, it does reveal that it has an eschatological dimension, concerning the end of time (v. 17), and it does say that the death of the persecutor will be brought about by God, not by man (v. 25). This is in fact the aspect of the vision that has yet to come true. Until that time comes, the vision must be kept secret, that is, it is something that must be believed in (v. 26). The “many days” that have still to pass may mean that the ordeals that lie ahead are very severe, or else that no one knows exactly when the end will come. In any event, after hearing the interpretation and being overcome by it, Daniel returns to his normal duties, though still under some strain (v. 27). He knows what is going to happen, yet he does not abandon his post, for “the expectation of a new

earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 39).¹

¹ Gavigan, J., McCarthy, B., & McGovern, T. (Eds.). (2005). [*Major Prophets*](#) (pp. 836–850). Dublin; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.