

On the Dilemma of Horns

Daniel 8

As I read Daniel 8 I find myself facing a dilemma.

In fact, given the content of the passage, I can confidently say that I am caught on the horns of a dilemma, or perhaps better a dilemma of horns.

The first dilemma is whether to preach on this passage or not. Daniel says at the end of the Chapter: "I was dismayed by the vision and did not understand it." And I suspect that many of us would agree with him. However, as tempting as it would be to dismiss these chapters as perhaps signs that hallucinogenic pharmaceuticals have a long history, this vision has been preserved in the Scriptures for us and for the building up of God's people so we need to do the hard work of seeking to understand them and applying its message to our lives.

VARIOUS WAYS OF DEALING WITH THIS PASSAGE

Which leads me to my next dilemma, how are to approach this passage?

LITERARY OBSERVATIONS

We could consider this chapter as a literary piece. The language has returned to Hebrew for the first time since the early verses of chapter 2. The use of the language of the Jews rather than the more international language of Aramaic suggests that the message of this passage is for insiders than for outsiders.

The style of the writing is early apocalyptic writing, but quite different from the previous chapter. This is described as a vision rather than a dream and perhaps because of that the symbolism is less surreal. The animals that make up the vision are not the grotesque and violent aberrations of chapter 7 but are the more common place ram and goat.

Also the symbolism is easier to decode, especially as the angel Gabriel in the second half of the chapter plainly tells us that the Ram is the kings of Media and Persia and the Goat is the king of Greece.

HISTORY IN THE BOOK

This leads us to consider this passage from a historical point of view and we can see that it is a symbolic or allegorical way of recounting history.

Imagine a sentence like this "The nautical chef on the hard working boat came to the south land". If you were given the clue that this was about Australia it would not take too long to understand that this was about Captain Cook coming on the Endeavour to Australia.

Likewise reading this chapter with a knowledge of Middle Eastern history show that here we have a description of the mighty empire of the Medes and Persians where the late comer, the Persians, came to be most prominent under the leadership of Cyrus who between 549-539BC defeated all comers. (two horns, one coming later but growing larger. v3)

The Persians reigned supreme until the arrival of Alexander the Great who in a lightning campaign between 334-331BC totally demolished their empire and established his own from Europe to India (the all conquering on horned speedy goat).

On Alexander's early death this Greek Kingdom was split into 4 (one horn to four horns). From what is known as the Selucid line came Antiochus who whilst the youngest of four brothers with no right to the throne through intrigue took the crown. In 169BC he had coins minted which described him as God manifest, or *Epiphanes*. In Judah from 167BC he persecuted faithful Jews and for more than three years desecrated the Temple so that the morning and evening sacrifices could not take place and placed a pagan shine in the holy of holies. This is described as a transgression which causes desolation. (v13)

It is this situation of the rituals of Jerusalem being disrupted that the vision is primarily concerned, and it is at this time that the vision ends with worship disrupted and God's people persecuted.

And so the heavenly conversation of "how long" will this situation last, how long will it be until the temple is restored. There is a clear answer of not indefinitely, even if the answer is rather enigmatic. The Sanctuary will be restored to its rightful state after 2300 mornings and evenings, either 3 and a bit years, or 6 and bit depending on how you count it.

There was a revolt against Antiochus which is recounted in the apocryphal book of Maccabees which liberated Jerusalem. Antiochus himself died of disease in 164BC, as verse 25 put it "He shall be broken, and not by human hands."

So whilst in the second part of the chapter Gabriel is given the task of interpreting the vision, history does a good job all by itself. In fact it does such a good job that many scholars see this not as history foretold but as history retold in symbolic form and put into the mouth of Daniel centuries before.

Now is not the time to enter into that debate except to say that I see no reason to immediately discount prophecy, especially as many events of Jesus life including his resurrection were clearly foretold centuries before.

The bigger problem for us is not when this was written but the fact that the events which it describes are clearly in the past for us. So even understanding the vision of the horns leaves us on the horns of a dilemma. What are we to do with it?

RESOLVING THE DILEMMA: SOME SUGGESTIONS

Let me put forward some proposals

ALL KINGDOMS HAVE A USE BY DATE

In one sense this vision continues the on-going theme in Daniel that God's kingdom is ultimate and all other kingdoms will fall. In this vision three kings or kingdoms which seem impregnable fall, Persia, Alexander and Antiochus. It is a salutary reminder to us that all human kingdoms no matter how strong they may seem are ultimately fragile and have a use by date.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

But the issue ultimately here is not about philosophical or even historical realities, but the issue is theological.

The great problem that is caused in this vision of history is that of the disruption and corruption of the worship of the Temple, the abomination that causes desolation.

The importance of true worship

Having God's view of these political realities is very salutary. In a sense this reminds us of the importance of worship, God takes this very seriously.

In part this is because with the Temple sacrificial system brought to a temporary halt then the people of Israel are in a sense cut off from their God, their sins are not forgiven they are not reconciled with the Lord.

We can be grateful that in Jesus death on the cross and his resurrection all that the sacrificial system looked forward to has been fulfilled. Never again can we be separated from God due to not having a building or a priest, through Christ we have all we need for our relationship with God.

But it also means that we should never take this privilege of forgiveness and reconciliation lightly and we should daily be giving thanks to God, morning and evening. Do we see that our relationship with God is that important? That which Antiochus sought to achieve by violence and persecution it seems to me is now often achieved by busyness, TV, apathy. How would God view this? Perhaps he would say how long will they be like this.

Abomination that causes desolation

There is perhaps a challenge here but there is also comfort.

When Antiochus undertakes his assault on the Jewish people it is viewed as an attack on God himself. God will not ultimately stand idly by whilst this happens he will act for his own sake and for the sake of his own people.

And whilst this truth is clearly here anchored in the historic events of the Second Century BC this remains something that God's faithful people can hold on to through all ages. Jesus for instance as he looks towards to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70AD uses the language of the abomination that causes desolation for what the Romans will do. In doing so he opens the comfort of Daniel 8 to all future situations where human political power seeks to take the place of God, or even deny the reality of God. However bleak things may seem, however downtrodden the things of God may seem, and the New Testament looks forward to such difficult times, things are not out of God's control.

Periods of persecution are ultimately only temporary, the pain and anguish will be real, even deadly but ultimately God's triumph is assured, his kingdom will come.

For many believers through the ages this has been a blessed truth that has kept them strong in the face of opposition. We should pray that our brothers and sisters who face persecution may know this for themselves. And whilst we may feel that this is not relevant for us right now at the end of the chapter Daniel is told to seal up the vision till the time comes. It may not be something we need to know now but a time may come when we do so that our faith will be strong.

DANIEL'S REACTION AND OURS

Lastly how do we respond to all this? Daniel's response was to be overcome and he lay sick for some days

And we can perhaps understand this, visions of kingdoms coming and going, of persecution, of the precious things of God under attack.

But Daniel doesn't stay in bed, we are told that he then got on with the king's business. He got on with the work he was called to do where God had put him.

In this odd little last verse we may find there is great wisdom. For the king which Daniel was serving at this point was Belshazzar, the very one who was soon to perform his own act of abomination which caused desolation when he used the holy vessels of the Jerusalem Temple in a decadent feast. Yet Daniel got on with serving him.

In other words whilst this vision taught him that all kingdoms were temporary, that sacrilege would not go unnoticed but suffering may come, he did not retreat from the world in fear, but rather in faith and hope got on with the life which God had called him to in the world.

Ultimately our calling is the same, we too need to get on with life for despite these unnerving truths ultimately there is no dilemma we can face the future with faith and hope.