

The First Beast of Daniel: A Lion with a Head of Gold

Daniel 2:37-38 and 7:2-4

DIG: What two ways is Babylon pictured in this section? Who were the four great beasts out of the sea? What made this lion different from other lions? When its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it, what did that represent?

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was troubled. He had a dream that he could not interpret. He called in the famous magi of Babylon and even they could not interpret his troubling dream. The king was so angry that he was about to execute them all when the commander of his guard met Daniel, who said that he could interpret the king's dream. Daniel told the king that he had seen a large statue, an enormous dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold (Dan 2:31-32a).

Daniel interpreted the meaning of the head of gold as being King Nebuchadnezzar himself, the head of the Babylonian Empire, or the first Gentile Empire. When he destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple in 586 BC, the Times of the Gentiles began. As a result, Babylon was the first of four Gentile empires to dominate Jerusalem.

Interpreting the king's dream, Daniel said to him: You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory. Then Daniel pointed out the extent of his rule when he said: In your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are the head of gold (2:37-38). God had given King Nebuchadnezzar authority over the whole entire earth, a universal reign and a universal authority. He was an absolute monarch and was above the law. The fact that he did not proceed to gain the universal reign is beside the point. If he had wanted to he could have conquered the whole inhabited world with guaranteed success because that was the power that ADONAI had given him. Two contemporary prophets of Daniel said the same thing (Jeremiah 27:5-8; Ezekiel 26:7-14).

God had given **King Nebuchadnezzar** authority over the whole earth. He chose not to extend it that far, but he could have. **Daniel** affirmed his absolute authority when he said: **O King, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted humbled, he humbled (Daniel 5:18-19).**

Many years later, **Daniel** had his first vision during the first year of **King Belshazzar's** reign. It was 553 BC, or fourteen years before the fall of **Babylon (Daniel 7:1)**. **Nebuchadnezzar** had been dead for nine years. After him, three kings followed in quick succession before **King Nabonidus** assumed the throne. Three years later **Nabonidus** made his son **Belshazzar** his coregent. Thus, **Belshazzar** was the last king of **Babylon** before the **Medes** and the **Persians** overthrew the **Babylonians** and came to power.

Daniel said: **In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds, emphasizing God's sovereignty and God's providence, of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts came up out of the great sea (7:2-3).** Whenever the word **sea** is used symbolically in Scripture, it always refers to the **Gentile nations (Isaiah 17:12-13; Matthew 13:47-50; Revelation 13:1, Ezekiel 26:3)**. So these **four great** kingdoms would be **Gentile** kingdoms, and each kingdom would be distinct from the others. **God**, in His sovereign will, was allowing this to happen for His own purposes and glory.

The first beast, like the **head of gold**, represented the **Babylonian Empire**. The first **Gentile** kingdom was like a **lion**. The **lion** is the king of the beasts and it was used as a symbol of **Babylon (Jeremiah 4:7, 49:19, 50:17 and 44)**. What makes this **lion** different from other lions was that it had the **wings of an eagle**. The **eagle** is the king of the birds and it was also used as a symbol of **Babylon (Jeremiah 48:40, 49:22; Ezekiel 17:3)**. Therefore, the **lion and the eagle** were both used by **Jeremiah** to describe **Nebuchadnezzar**. **I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it (Daniel 7:4)**. This is a description of the proud and self-sufficient **King Nebuchadnezzar** being reduced to a field animal to realize his dependence on **God (Daniel 4:1-37)**. But it also represents both **Nebuchadnezzar** and his empire, for as near as a man could become a beast, he became one. And as much as a beast can become a man, **Babylon** lost its beast-like nature and its animalistic characteristics and became more humane. This summarizes the experience of **Babylon** changing from the lust of conquest to the building of culture.