

26 August 2007

“The Most Pretentious Title Anyone Could Have Used”¹

Passage: Daniel 7:1-28; Reading: Daniel 7:9-14

Do we make too much of Jesus? Many people would say so.

If you engage in a respectful conversation with an informed member of another faith, he or she is likely to tell you that our understanding of Jesus is a real stumbling block. The assumption is that we all believe in the same God. If we honored Jesus as a remarkable teacher, as a special prophet, or even as one of several manifestations of the divine, it might be possible to emphasize what we all have in common. But we make claims for a first century man which no other religion can embrace.

You don't even have to venture into the world of organized religion to encounter this objection. Whether they are able to articulate their views or not, the average Joe or Martha who believes in a supreme being, would probably feel much the same way.

For that matter, you are probably aware of the fact that there are Christian theologians today who argue that we should downscale the claims we make for Jesus.² And, by the way, this is not a new phenomenon.

So I ask again, “Do we make too much of Jesus? Have we got it wrong? Can the Bible be legitimately interpreted in such a way as to make God (the Father) all important and reduce Jesus to no more than a man, a great man, an exceptional man, perhaps even a unique man, but certainly not a divine person? This is no academic question. Our very salvation depends upon it.

What is particularly significant to me is the unity of Scripture's testimony concerning him. When we look at the big picture and take all the passages together, we are left in no doubt as to his identity. The picture is multi-faceted but it is coherent.

This morning we are considering a highly significant passage. It occurs not in the Gospels or the Epistles but in Daniel, chapter 7. In fact, “this chapter has been called ‘the center of gravity of the whole book,’ and one of the summits of scripture.”³ At its heart stands a vision of “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven . . . to whom is given authority, glory and sovereign power” (Dan 7:14). He is worshipped and his dominion is an everlasting dominion. What makes this revelation so important is the fact that this was the term Jesus used to reveal his identity and to characterize his mission. As we shall see, it is loaded with significance. Understanding this term goes a long way towards answering the question, “Do we make too much of Jesus?” So let's turn to the seventh chapter of Daniel.

¹ Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 19.

² For example, Paul F. Knitter; *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985).

³ Andre LaCocque quoted in Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 137.

I WE SEE JUST HOW BAD AND HOW TRANSIENT THE PRESENT ORDER CAN BE.

The amazing scene we are about to examine is set against a frightening background (of corrupt human government). God gives Daniel a vision that has such an impact on him that it leaves him deeply disturbed--so much so that his face turns pale (7:28).

A. Daniel's Dream

Three weeks ago we considered Daniel's interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a huge statue. Approximately forty years have elapsed. Daniel himself has a dream in the first year of King Belshazzar. It too involves a succession of earthly kingdoms and their replacement by a heavenly kingdom. But the imagery is very different. We shall be focusing on the central part of his dream, but we do need to see this in the context of the entire chapter. So let's get an overview of it.

B. The Setting

Daniel is on the coast of a turbulent sea. At this time the sea was a symbol of chaos. It would have evoked a sense horror and an anticipation that something ominous was about to happen. Daniel's sense of foreboding would have intensified as four beasts come up out of the sea, one after the other. They are perversions of the natural order and would have evoked a sense of revulsion in the original readers.

C. Essential Meaning

There is, of course, a time and place to look at each of the beasts and especially the fourth beast and the little horn who speaks boastfully against the Most High and oppresses the saints. Sufficient detail is given for us to identify them. I do, however, agree with Tremper Longman that "the purpose is not so much writing history in advance as making a theological statement about the conflict between human evil and God."⁴ In fact, we would be missing the point of the passage if we became preoccupied with the details of the beasts in order to satisfy our curiosity and neglected the far more significant picture that follows.

D. Similarity and Development

Interestingly, there is a correspondence between the four-kingdom scheme in Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the four awful animals. What's more, in both dreams the kingdoms represented by the imagery are replaced by God's kingdom that is universal and eternal. As different as the symbols are, this dream is, in a sense, an elaboration of the dream in chapter 2. We are certainly given a different perspective on the kingdoms of the world and we are given more information about the kingdom God establishes.

E. Interpretation

As I said, we are confining ourselves to the most essential truth that is being conveyed. There can be no doubt that these four beasts represent human government and especially the darker side of human government. God does not write off all

⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Daniel: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 185.

human government. He has instituted the state to restrain evil and administer justice (Rom 13:1). But, as part of the fallen world, governments and empires can become blasphemous monsters.⁵

We are *reading* the description. Imagine *seeing* it in life-like vividness and being caught up in the intense emotion that such a dream evokes. A succession of blood-thirsty, freakish brutes! And then, suddenly, there is a dramatic change of scene. The transition is abrupt as we are taken from the scene by the sea to a courtroom. It is no ordinary courtroom. No longer are we looking at animals. The two main characters are described in human-like terms.

II WE SEE A SINGLE HUMAN BEING GIVEN UNIVERSAL AND EVERLASTING DOMINION

In graphic terms, God shows us that there is a change of government: the corrupt, deficient order is replaced by a just and perfect order.

A. The description of the two main characters in the scene is nothing short of amazing.

1. “Thrones were set in place,” but, as Joyce Baldwin comments, “only one was occupied, and the seer’s attention is riveted by that one, the only one that mattered.”⁶ The One who took his seat on the throne is described as “the Ancient of Days.” The description here leaves us in no doubt that the depiction is of God.

His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.
A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (7:9-10).

Remember this is a dream. This is not what God looks like. The symbolism draws our attention to his splendor, his righteousness, his absolute wisdom and the majesty of his throne. This is God, specifically in his role as judge. “The court was seated, and the books were opened.”

⁵ John Yoder captures the dual nature of the state and the Christian’s responsibility towards it: “No state can be so low on the scale of relative justice that the duty of the Christian is no longer to be subject; no state can rise so high on that scale that Christians are not called to some sort of suffering because of their refusal to agree with its self-glorification and the resultant injustices.” John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1964), 77.

⁶ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 141.

2. In the meanwhile, the little horn continues with his blasphemous words but, as Daniel looked, the beast itself was killed and its body destroyed and thrown into the fire. Despite the blasphemy and the seeming invincibility of this horn, it is God who is sovereign.
3. There follows the most incredible development.

In my vision at night I looked,
and there before me was one like a son of man,
coming with the clouds of heaven.
He approached the Ancient of Days
and was led into his presence.
He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;
all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away,
and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (7:13-14).

Let's unpack this statement. At first sight, the term "one like a son of man" means no more than human being. In fact, it is the humanity of the one who approaches the Ancient of Days that is emphasized. 'Son of man' was not a messianic title or figure in the inter-testamental Jewish writings. Standing alone, it is another way of saying "human being." But the one who is led into the presence of the Ancient of Days is said to be *like* a son of man. And he comes "with the clouds of heaven". Remember, this passage is intentionally full of symbolism. He is riding a cloud chariot and this is a prerogative of God alone (Ex 13:12; 19:6; Lev 16:2; Ps 68:4; Nahum 1:3).⁷

Significantly, this human being who comes with the clouds of heaven and is approaches the Ancient of Days is "given authority, glory and sovereign power." What's more "all peoples, nations and men of every language *worship* him." Don't forget the repeated insistence in Scripture that only God is to be worshipped. But this one who is 'like a son of man' receives universal worship and his dominion is an everlasting dominion.

B. Most importantly, Jesus intentionally employed this term to identify himself and to describe his role.⁸

1. In fact, it is his favorite self-designation. In the Gospels, no one else uses this term to describe Jesus, but he repeatedly uses it to refer to himself.
2. Christopher Wright states that "by using it of himself Jesus could avoid the package of misunderstandings surrounding other familiar messianic titles."⁹ He was able to explain just who the Son of Man is.

⁷ Longman, *Daniel*, 187.

⁸ Ethelbert Stauffer contends that "son of man" was just about the most pretentious title anyone could have used in the ancient Near East. Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 19.

3. Just think of how he used the term:
- While on earth, the Son of Man exercised authority that is proper only to God. Do you remember that before he healed the paralytic, Jesus said, “Your sins are forgiven”? Understandably the teachers of the law were unhappy, wondering who this fellow thought he was. They were convinced that he was blaspheming. “Who,” after all, “can forgive sins but God?” In response, Jesus put a question to them: “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . . He said to the paralytic, ‘I tell you, Get up take your mat and go home.’” (Mark 2:4-11). The Son of Man had authority appropriate only to God.
 - As the Son of Man, Jesus enunciates the reason he came. When he pronounced that salvation had come to the home of a crooked tax collector, he added, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). When he instructed his position-conscious disciples to be humble servants, he added, “For even the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). No sooner had Peter identified him as the Messiah than he “began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). He came to seek the lost, to serve and to suffer and then to rise again.
 - Speaking of himself, Jesus referred to a day when “the sign of the Son of Man (would) appear in the sky and all the nations of the earth would mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory (Matt 24:30).
 - When Caiaphas, the high priest, invoked the oath of the covenant and insisted: “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” Jesus answered, “Yes, it is as you say,” and added, “In the future, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The high priest tore his clothes in disgust. “He has spoken blasphemy,” he said. And the member of the Sanhedrin responded, “He is worthy of death.” (Matt 26:63-64).

So, the Son of Man was one who would come with a specific assignment; he would be a man but he would paradoxically receive the honour due to God. He would exercise the prerogatives of God. He would seek and save the lost. He would serve and give his life a ransom for many. He would be suffer and then receive authority. In Revelation, John sees a vision of “one like a son of

⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 149.

man”. He falls at his feet as though dead. But the one “like a son of man” placed his right hand on John and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and look I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev 1:17-18).

4. Even where the term is not explicitly used, the thought is contained. Take the words of Jesus after his resurrection to the two disconsolate disciples on the Emmaus road: “How foolish you are and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer all these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:25-26; cf. Phil 2:5-11)
5. We are not considering the interpretation given to Daniel in any depth this morning, but I do need to mention one important matter. The Son of Man receives a kingdom that will never be destroyed (Dan 7:14). We are later told that “the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever--yes for ever and ever” (Dan 7:18). There is no problem here. It is the kingdom of the Son of Man that is an everlasting kingdom, and the saints of the Most High are included in it on account of him (Dan 7:26-27; cf. Luke 12:32; 22:30; Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12; Heb 2:5-12; 12:28; Rev 2:26-27; 3:21).

So, do we make too much of Jesus? There is a clear answer to our original question.

III WE SEE THAT WE CAN NEVER MAKE TOO MUCH OF JESUS!

Not if we understand who he is! If he is this divine-human person to whom God has committed all authority and glory and sovereign power, whose dominion is everlasting and whose kingdom is universal, then should we not make even more of him than we do? If the government is upon his shoulders (Isa 9:6), if it is indeed true that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God (John 13:3); if he was right when he said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” (Matt 20:18) can we ever make too much of him?

We are to remember that it was God’s purpose “that in everything he should have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on heaven or things on earth.” (Col 1:19-20). “God has appointed him heir of all things” and “through (him) he made the universe.” He is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 1:2-3).

IV WE SEE THAT THERE ARE (AT LEAST) THREE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR US TODAY.

A. We ought to proclaim him unapologetically.

1. Do you remember what happened when the apostles were hauled before the Sanhedrin and warned “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”? They responded, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4: 18-20). There was considerable scope for diversity of expression in the Jewish religion, but *this* was not acceptable! When asked about the miracle of healing that had taken place in the name of Jesus, Peter declared that it was “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” He added, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10-12).
2. This holds good today. Jesus is the person whom God has appointed to be the Savior.
3. Nowadays many see this as a politically incorrect statement. But nothing has happened to indicate that we need to adapt the message of hope and life to accommodate current sensitivities. We must declare this message politely and sensibly, but we need to do so unapologetically. Not long ago I was visiting my favorite little town just across the border. There on the notice board of the Christian Reformed Church in Lynden was the simple statement: “We don’t change the message; the message changes us.” We have a great message to proclaim and we ought to do so unashamedly.

B. We ought to trust him unreservedly.

1. The emphasis in the New Testament proclamation is on complete and total trust in him for salvation. It is not possible to trust him exclusively and, at the same time, to rely on anything else to contribute to your salvation. It cannot be Jesus plus good works or Jesus plus church membership or Jesus and what you happen to believe theologically. To trust him for salvation is to forfeit every other hope and to relinquish every other claim.
2. I have to tell you that there is no other way
3. Perhaps there is somebody here (there usually is) who raises the objection, “What about those who live in Outer Mongolia (or some other place where it is assumed that the gospel has never been heard)? This is a question I have considered many times and on which I have done a fair amount of work. With respect, the question, as it is usually posed, is a stupid one. The infinitely just, merciful, wise God is perfectly capable of handling that situation and he has it under control. But it is a question that can never be applied *to you and me*. We are not in Outer-Mongolia! We are sitting here and being presented with

the claims of Jesus. My immediate concern is, “What about those who *have* heard and haven’t responded?”

C. We ought to follow him unconditionally

1. Because of who he is and what he has done, he deserves nothing less than my total and complete allegiance.
2. We cannot affirm that he is indeed the Son of Man and maintain a lackadaisical approach to following him. It must be a scandal to those who look on at us and hear the claims we make for him, if we follow him half-heartedly. If this is the case, our actions give the lie to our words.
3. Paul spoke about what he describes as “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.” He was more than willing to forfeit every seeming advantage in order to know Jesus better (Phil 3:7-10). By doing so he was simply living out the implications of his convictions.

Conclusion

So let me ask once more, “Do we make too much of Jesus?” The answer is, “We really can’t.” He is our salvation; he is our life; he our righteousness and our wisdom. As the Son of Man, he has been appointed to have universal and everlasting dominion. Bowing the knee to him now is the *right* thing to do. It is the *best* thing to do. It is the *only* thing to do.