

Monstrous Empires and the Kingdom of God: What Do Monsters Reveal about the Empire?

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In chapter 7 of the book that bears his name, Daniel relays the details of a vision that he saw. The four winds of heaven stirred up the Great Sea, then four beasts came out of the sea. The first one looked like a winged lion, the second was a fierce bear, and the third one was a leopard with four wings and four heads. The description signals special attention to the fourth beast by reminding the reader (or, rather, the beholder) that Daniel saw this “in the visions by night.” The fourth beast was so terrifying that the seer could not compare it to any of the known wild animals. This beast had iron teeth and mighty feet and eleven horns. It was devouring and breaking everything into pieces. The eleventh horn of the beast was speaking arrogantly. Even compared to the other beasts, this monster was “terrifying and dreadful.”¹

Immediately after that, Daniel's vision changed. Contrary to the raging sea and its malformed monsters that he had seen, he saw a vision of the throne of the Ancient of Days, who was surrounded by flames of fire and thousands of servants. Such a vision was

¹ The traditions that form the background for the vision of Daniel 7 come from two contexts. The first is the combat myth known from other parts in the ancient near East. In Ugarit, modern day Ras Shamra in Syria, there was a myth about the Canaanite god Baal fighting Yamm (Sea), who is associated with a multi-headed dragon. Baal, who rides on the clouds, gains dominion and establishes his kingdom upon the defeat of his rival Sea. This combat myth found its way into the Bible, in which YHWH fights against Leviathan and the Sea. This appropriation of the combat myth appears in Psalms 74 and 89; Isaiah 27:1; 51:9-10; and Ezekiel 29–32. When YHWH defeats the Sea and Leviathan, YHWH restores the order of the cosmos and establishes his dominion in Zion. The second tradition that stands behind the monsters of Daniel 7 comes from the book of Hosea 13:7-8, “which compares YHWH’s own violence against Israel to the threats of a lion, a leopard, a bear, and an unnamed animal.” Unlike the ancient near eastern tradition, God in Daniel 7 does not fight the sea monsters, and in contrast to the Hosea passage, YHWH is not coming in judgment against Israel. Carol A. Newsom and Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary*, First edition, The Old Testament Library (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

a vision of God enthroned while the court sat in judgment. This second vision was dramatically different from the first, showing a different reality from that first vision even though the two visions were linked. So, for instance, in verse 7, the seer introduced the fourth beast with the expression, “I saw in the visions by night” and then, in verse 13, the visionary uses the clause, “as I watched in the night visions,” in order to introduce another crucial scene in the vision, namely, the appearance of the one who looks like a human being, who receives an everlasting glory and kingship. Reminders about the timing of the vision join its two parts together.

This vision left Daniel terrified and confused, in search of an interpretation of the vision. Typical of apocalyptic literature,² a heavenly being explained to him the vision. The four beasts represent four kingdoms or empires, while the one that looks like a human being represents the kingdom of God manifested among the holy ones of the Most High. Scholars have understood the beasts in Daniel 7 as referring to four empires: Babylon, Persia, Mede, and Greece.³

² A classic definition of apocalyptic literature describes this type of literature as follows: “‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” J. J. Collins, *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia 14; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979). In addition to Daniel 7-12, the most well known apocalypse that made it to the Bible is the book of Revelation. The vision in Daniel 7 and its interpretation share with other apocalyptic literature the interest in dividing history into periods, the metaphorical representation of world powers, the dualistic perspective in which the world empires and the kingdom of God are seen in antagonistic relationship, and the firm belief that God is in control of the course of history.

³ Louis Francis Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (AB; 23; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 212–13. For some Christian interpretive traditions the four empires refer to Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. For representatives of this approach see John Calvin, *Daniel 7-12*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom25.ii.i.html> (accessed December 17, 2015); and Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 150. I believe that the author(s) of Daniel 7 was addressing the events of the second century BCE; yet the New Testament appropriated those traditions to speak of the destruction of the temple in 70 CE (see Mark 13).

Unsatisfied with this brief interpretation, Daniel desires to know more about the fourth repulsive and terrifying beast and, more importantly, about the little horn that appeared on its head. This is a fourth empire, the heavenly being informs Daniel, and the little horn is an arrogant king who will speak against the Most High and will persecute the holy ones. He “will attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law.” The first three kingdoms will lose their dominion, while the fourth beast will be put to death. Its body will be destroyed and will be given over to be burned with fire. In contrast to these beastly kingdoms, the kingdom of God, which is represented by a human being, will endure forever.

In this essay I am interested in exploring the following questions: Is there more to the vision of the four empires and the kingdom of God than just a survey of the history of ancient empires? Is there any significance to the portrayal of world empires as monsters? If so, what do monsters reveal about the empires and what do they offer as a warning to the members of the kingdom of God?

I suggest that the embodiment of empires in the form of abnormal monsters not only speaks of the terror the imperial hegemony inflicts on the subjected peoples (socially, economically, militarily, and politically), but it also forms a script for resistance to the imperial politics of sameness mediated through the otherness of the monstrous body. In order to support my proposal, I will define what a monster is then draw some connections between the monsters and the empire, focusing primarily on the fourth beast of Daniel 7. I will finish with a warning about what such monsters reveal to those who claim to be part of the kingdom of God.

Joan Landes offers a comprehensive definition of monsters when she writes,

If the question “What is a monster?” has produced countless replies in different historical circumstances, there is one content running through all these responses: whatever a monster is, it is not one of us. Monsters violate the borders between man and beast or human and divine, but they are also a way of talking about the rejected or repulsive Other. Monsters disturb a shared sense of decorum, order, and taste. They are grotesque, distorted, ugly, bestial, and horrifying. They fascinate and repel. They are said to link bodily deformity to moral or political evils. And, above all, monsters offer a way of thinking about the world.⁴

According to this definition, monsters embody the fear of the unknown other. In our text, the otherness of the monsters is represented through the abnormality of their bodies. It is safe to say that not many people have seen a winged-lion or a leopard with multiple heads and wings. The monstrosity of the bear is underlined by its excessive hunger for flesh. And then there is the fourth beast, which, even compared to the other three beasts, was terrifyingly dreadful and exceedingly strong. Multiple times (vv. 7, 20, 23) the narrator asserts that the fourth beast was quite different from the other ones, and its difference from them makes it especially horrifying.

French literary critic René Girard's famous work, *Violence and the Sacred*, helps us understand the monsters and the portrayal of the empires as monsters in Daniel 7.⁵ Girard argues that though monsters appear different from heroes, there are underlying similarities between them. Indeed, for Girard, similarity and resemblance between two figures can become a source of terror. René Girard argues: “A fundamental principle, often overlooked, is that the double and the monster are one and the same thing.”⁶ When a subject and a rival mimic each other in desiring one object – that is, they are

⁴ Joan Landes, “Revolutionary Anatomies,” in *Monstrous Bodies / Political Monstrosities: In Early Modern Europe* (ed. Laura Knoppers and Joan Landes; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 2004), 154.

⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 160.

similar and pursue a similar goal – clash is inevitable.⁷ Conflict is not caused by the differences between rivals but, instead, conflict arises because of the sameness that is signaled by their pursuit of a common goal and the similarities in the way they pursue that goal. We make the other into a monster in order to distinguish ourselves from a competitor who acts like us and wants the same things we want. Making the other into a monster frees us to behave violently towards that other.

Girard's thesis is shocking: it isn't the differences between us that lead to violence; it is the similarities. Thus, although various anthropologists, including Victor Turner, explain violence⁸ as caused by differences between people, Girard argues that the absence of these differences is what initiates monstrosity and causes violence to erupt.⁹

So what are we to do with that fourth beast of Daniel 7? Most scholars have understood this monster to refer to the Greek Empire, which ruled the ancient Near East under the leadership of Alexander the Great. The small horn that had eyes, spoke arrogantly against the Most High, and persecuted the Holy Ones of the Most High refers to the Seleucid king Antiochus the fourth who called himself Antiochus Epiphanies, "Antiochus, God Manifest."¹⁰ This king according to Daniel 7:25, "attempted to change the sacred

⁷ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 146. Of course, not all mimetic desires lead to rivalry and violence. "As long as the object of yearning is not closed off to general use – for example, if my friend and I want to learn the same language, or read the same book, or listen to the same piece of music – then conflict need not arise. But as soon as the object is cordoned off from this possibility of shared enjoyment, as is the case with sexual relationships, or jockeying for social prestige, mimesis will lead to competition." Kirwan, *Discovering Girard*, 20–21.

⁸ Victor Turner argues that "structural differentiation, both vertical and horizontal, is the foundation of strife and factionalism, and of struggles in dyadic relations between incumbents of positions or rivals for positions" (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [Chicago: Aldine, 1969], 179; cited in Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 50).

⁹ Girard was able to demonstrate this notion of the erosion of differences as a source of violence and monstrosity in various classical works, such as *Oedipus the King* (cf. the similarities between Oedipus and Laius) and *Julius Caesar* (cf. similarities between Brutus and Cassius on the one hand and Octavius Caesar and Mark Antony on the other). See Fleming, *René Girard*, 43.

¹⁰ W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, (Interpretation; Atlanta : John Knox Press, 1984).

seasons and the law,” thereby attempting to change Jewish identity by way of altering religious norms and cultural observances.¹¹

The book of Maccabees gives a fuller picture of the imperialistic politics of Antiochus Epiphanes through which he tried to eradicate differences between Jewish and Greek identity.¹² 1 Maccabees 1:41-42 says “the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs.” Making all people one and the same meant making all peoples Greek by adopting Greek customs and abandoning whatever sets the different peoples apart. Building a gymnasium and altars for idols in Jerusalem are examples of the former, while forcing Jews to give up practicing circumcision, keeping Sabbath, and offering sacrifices, are examples of the latter (2 Macc 6:5-6). Some Jews welcomed this phenomenon of Hellenization and accommodated the empire, but other Jews like the Maccabees and the community represented by the book of Daniel refused to give up on their identity markers and resisted the imperial politics of sameness.¹³

This returns us to René Girard and his analysis of the monstrous. While his analysis is important in that it makes us aware that underlying the apparent otherness of the

¹¹ The phrase “and shall attempt to change the sacred seasons and the law” has been understood in different ways: (1) A change in the cultic calendar: that is, a change from a 364-day solar calendar to a 360-day lunar calendar (James C. Vanderkam, “2 Maccabees 6, 7A and Calendrical Change in Jerusalem,” *JSJ* 1981, 12:52–74); (2) A reference to Antiochus’s challenge to the divine sovereignty manifest in determining the seasons and times of the events (Newsom and Breed, *Daniel*, 241). It seems to me that the text here refers to the specific acts of Antiochus Epiphanes who tried to alter Jewish identity by way of changing the cultic practices. See also John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 322.

¹² On the complexity of the use of Maccabees to construct the history of this era, see John H. Hayes and Sara Mandell, *The Jewish People in Classical Antiquity: From Alexander to Bar Kochba* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 49–66.

¹³ Loren Johns suggested that there is a difference between the Maccabean community and the Danielic community in their resistance of the empire. For Johns, while the Maccabees believed that bearing arms is a faithful way of resisting the empire, the Danielic community resisted nonviolently. Loren Johns, “Identity and Resistance: The Varieties of Competing Models in Early Judaism,” in *Qumran Studies: New Approaches, New Questions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007).

monster is a shared sameness between two competing rivals, he does not bear in mind the power imbalance between the two subjects. Daniel 7 witnesses to a power imbalance between Antiochus Epiphanes and the persecuted Jews who were being forced to give up their identity in order to fit into the norms of the empire. In such a context, portraying the empire as a monster is a form of resistance to an empire that sought to make all peoples one and forced communities to give up the unique markers of their religious or political identity. The sameness that the imperial policies imposed on the marginalized Jews is resisted by way of emphasizing the impurity, the otherness, and the strangeness of the world powers through the hybrid and anomalous bodies of the beasts.

In the midst of the chaos of persecution and the horror of the loss of identity, one who looks like a human being appears before God, and this one who looks like a human being receives the kingdom on behalf of the Holy Ones of the Most High.

For the first time in this vision, a kingdom is not represented by a beast. ... This 'One like a Son of Man' stands in contrast to the beasts as the ideal human being who does as God wills and helps to establish God's kingdom, according to the justice that God intends. He is portrayed as the antithesis to the wicked beasts that have ruled over their own unjust kingdoms and have persecuted innocent subjects.¹⁴

The figure, "the one who looks like a human being," has been understood to be referring to a human being who represents the people of God or to an angelic being, specifically the archangel Michael. What concerns me for the sake of this essay is the contrast between the humanness of the one who receives the dominion from God and the monsters that represent the world empires. The text speaks of the one who is like a human being and says, "To him was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."

¹⁴ Sharon Pace, *Daniel* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, Ga. : Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2008), 245.

But doesn't this description of the Kingdom of God come close to the kingdom Antiochus IV tried to create? A survey of the history of interpretation of Daniel 7 shows that Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities during various historical periods have typically identified themselves with the Holy Ones and their opponents with what I am referring to here as monsters.¹⁵ Faith communities constantly face a grievous temptation with regard to power: to become the monsters of empire. The readers of Daniel 7 are invited to gaze at the raging sea lest they encounter their own reflection among the monstrous empires rather than among the representatives of the divine court. The English word *monster* comes from the Latin word *monstrum*, which means “to reveal” or “to warn.”¹⁶ Paradoxically, the fourth monster in Daniel 7 warns against the temptation to control other human beings and highlights the danger of the attempt to eradicate other people’s unique identities. The script of judgment that was inscribed on the fragmented body of the fourth monster warns the readers not to abuse their power in relation to other human communities. How, then, should members of the Kingdom of God avoid becoming a monstrous empire?

I think Daniel 7 can be a resource for communities of faith as they struggle to avoid reproducing the empires they seek to oppose. First, Daniel 7 was written by the powerless as a way of resisting the empire. While some readers of the text might share this location of marginalization with the community responsible for writing the text, other readers might do better to read these texts against themselves, wondering whether they might be the ones who abuse their economic, military, and political power in subjugating

¹⁵ See Newsom and Breed, *Daniel*, 273–283.

¹⁶ Poole, W. Scott (2011-10-15). *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Kindle Locations 290–295). Baylor University Press. Kindle Edition.

other human beings under their imperial force. Second, the community of faith in Daniel 7 that suffered from the tyranny of the empire relied solely on the agency of God as a judge. For those who are persecuted by the imperial force of Antiochus Epiphanes, chaos and oppression seemed to be the final word. Yet for the visionary Daniel, God is in control of the world events and God's judgment is pronounced on those who claim a power that does not belong to them. And, third, dismantling monstrosity and violence depends on finding the appropriate distance between the divine and the human, and doing this hinges on maintaining a tension between what is shared and what is different between the human communities.

When humans are content with their humanness, their potential monstrosity is avoided. This is evident in what happened to the first beast, which represents the Babylonian empire. In Daniel 7, the winged lion was given a human heart, which seems to be a reference to Nebuchadnezzar returning to his dominion when he recognized that all power belongs to God. In Daniel 7, the dominion of the one who looks like a human being and the holy ones of the Most High is seen as a gift from the Ancient of Days.

And note that as the text describes the kingdom of God, the different nations, peoples, and languages maintain their unique identities as members of the kingdom of God. God's reign offers humans something common that brings them together, namely, they are all equal humans before God regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or socioeconomic status. At the same time, the kingdom of God does not attempt to make its members identical with each other. The members of the kingdom of God are called to

embrace and celebrate cultural, linguistic, and racial differences, creating a beautiful mosaic of a community that seeks to worship God and to serve other human beings who are both within and outside of their faith community.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it mean to live in an empire? How do empires exert control over those who live in them?

2. According to Marzouk, "monsters embody the fear of the unknown other." How do you understand this idea? Can you think of beings in the present that are portrayed as monsters? What is the impact of using the language of the monstrous in how we relate to others?

3. Rene Girard argues that we resort to violence not because we fear those who are different from us but because we recognize our similarities with others and then try to make them different from us in order to justify our antipathy toward them. What do you think of this argument? Can you think of examples from scripture that would support such an argument?