

Exegetical Notes on Daniel 7: 9-10

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The reading from the Old Testament which is appointed to the Second-Last Sunday in the Church Year in Series B of Lutheran Worship consists in two verses of Daniel 7. (The exegesis of these verses below is, in answer to several enquiries, in no way designed to promote the use in the main service of the week of the three-year series provided in Lutheran Worship nor of any other modern selections from the gospels and epistles in such a context. This exegete, on the contrary, would continue to urge, on various grounds, fidelity to the pericopal tradition inherited from the ancient church by the church of the reformation and modified only slightly by the Blessed Reformer of the Church, if one is speaking specifically of the gospels and epistles to be read in the main (eucharistic) service of the week. No comparable series of readings, on the other hand, from the Old Testament was either handed down from the ancient church or bestowed on us by the Blessed Reformer; nor, indeed, is there such a program of readings from the New Testament to be used in all the possible additional offices of any given week. In such cases, therefore, even such a traditionalist as this exegete is able, with consistency, to make use of any pericope drawn from the region of Holy Scripture desired.)

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY SETTING

The historical and literary observations which follow assume the auctorial integrity of the Book of Daniel which this exegete has defended elsewhere (especially in The Prophetic Books of the Babylonian Exile and the Persian Empire). The various events recorded in the Book of Daniel and the various prophecies contained therein were uttered between 605 B.C. and 536 B.C., and the record of each was probably written down immediately. Chapter 7, in particular, derives from the year 552-551 B.C., since Daniel specifies the first regnal year of Belshazzar as King of Babylon (7:1), which is to say the viceroy of his father Nabonidus.

The purpose of Daniel in writing the book known by his name was to encourage the people of God in the midst of all possible opposition. The theme, correspondingly, of the Book of Daniel may be stated thus: The God of Israel is in complete control of history. The Book of Daniel is the archetypal exemplar in the Old Testament -- and, indeed, in the Bible as a whole -- of the genre of literature known as apocalyptic. Even the Book of Revelation assumes a prior familiarity with Daniel and builds on the foundation laid there. The apocalyptic genre may be defined as a variety of prophecy which reveals to human view the whole future course of human history by virtue of the plan of God on behalf of His people.

Each of the first nine chapters of the Book of Daniel forms a distinct unit of material, while the final unit embraces all of the final three chapters into which the book has come to be customarily divided since medieval times. The two main parts of the volume are the historical corpus comprising the first six chapters and the visionary corpus comprising the last six chapters. The four visions found in chapters 7-12 stand in the chronological order in which they were received by the prophet Daniel. Thus, as was already intimated above, the vision recorded in chapter 7 came to Daniel by night sometime between the spring of 552 and the spring of 551 B.C.

Chapter 7 constitutes the central section of the Book of Daniel. As the first of the visions of Daniel, it serves, on the one hand, as the bridge from the historical corpus to the visionary corpus. As the final chapter in Aramaic, on the other hand, it serves as the bridge from the chapters written in Aramaic (2:4-7:28) to those written in Hebrew (8-12). In a more thematic sense, indeed, Daniel 7 sets forth the general scheme of the history of the world which is elaborated in its specific aspects in chapters 2-6 on the one hand and chapters 8-12 on the other hand.

The dream which comprises Daniel 7 falls into three main parts in accordance with the following outline:

I. The Introduction (verse 1)

II. The Dream of Daniel (verses 2-27)

A. The Three Visions (verses 2-14)

1. The First Vision (verses 2-6)

a. The Sequence of Four Beasts (verses 2-3)

b. The First Beast (verse 4)

c. The Second Beast (verse 5)

d. The Third Beast (verse 6)

2. The Second Vision (verse 7-12)

a. The Career of the Fourth Beast (verse 7)

b. The Career of the Antichrist (verse 8)

c. The Final Judgment (verse 9-10)

d. The End of the Beasts and Antichrist (verses 11-12)

(1.) Antecedents of the End (11a)

(2.) The Final Judgment (11b)

(3.) Antecedents of the End (12)

3. The Third Vision (verses 13-14)

B. The Interpretation of the Visions (verses 15-27)

1. The Introduction (verse 15)
2. The First Question (verse 16)
3. The First Answer (verses 17-18)
 - a. Antecedents of the End (17-18a)
 - b. The Final Judgment (18b)
4. The Second Question (verses 19-22)
 - a. The Career of the Fourth Beast (verse 19)
 - b. The Career of the Antichrist (verses 20-21)
 - c. The Final Judgment (verse 22)
4. The Second Answer (verses 23-27)
 - a. The Career of the Fourth Beast (verses 23-24a)
 - b. The Career of the Antichrist (verses 24b-25)
 - c. The Final Judgment (verses 26-27)
- III. The Conclusion (verse 28)

The pericope now before us, then, consists in the middle two verses of the second vision of Daniel 7. Specific reference, however, is made back to these verses, by way of interpretation, firstly in the second half of verse 18 and then, more specifically, in verse 22 and again in verses 26-27.

A LITERAL TRANSLATION AND COMMENTS

9. I was beholding until thrones were placed, Even as One Ancient of Days was seated. His garment was white as snow And the hair of His head as pure wool. His throne was flames of fire; Its wheels were burning fire.

The initial phrase "I was beholding" renders the first common singular perfect of hwh and the active participle of chzh, which means "behold" (both being forms of the peal, which is the basic binyan in Biblical Aramaic). The verb hwh means "come to be" and "become" at basis, but it becomes a simple copula with predicate adjectives and, as here, with participles in the so-called periphrastic conjugations (BDB, 1089b-1090a). The verb chzh means "see" or "behold" whether transitively or intransitively (BDB, 1092b).

The phrase chazeh haweyth occurs eight times in the course of Daniel 7, beginning with verse 2. On several occasions the addition of a prepositional phrase ("in vision by night" in verse 2 and "in the visions of the night" in verses 7 and 14) serves to divide the single dream of Daniel into the several visions which are to be distinguished therein. By means of its inclusion of the participle the phrase emphasizes the continual unwavering attention which Daniel was giving in his visions to the things which were coming into view, one after another, in the course of the night.

The phrase "One Ancient of Days" in the translation above renders the indefinite construct clause 'attiq-yomin, which consists in the adjective 'attiq (beginning with ayin) used substantively and the absolute plural of the noun yom (BDB, 1095b). The trilateral root 'tq (beginning with ayin) means most basically "move forward or away" in the various Semitic tongues in which it is found (BDB, 801a). In Arabic age is one of various regions to this idea is applied, while in Aramaic "grow old" becomes the ordinary significance of the verb (BDB, 801a).

In Classical Hebrew, too, a similar usage occurs in Job 21:7 and Psalm 6:8 (MT, verse 7 EV). Brown-Driver-Briggs, indeed, assumes an "Aramaic sense" in these two cases: "advance (in years ...) and hence "grow old and weak" (BDB, 801a). The lexicon likewise regards as an "Aramaism" the use of the adjective 'attiq (which occurs but twice in the Hebrew chapters of the Bible) to mean "old" or "ancient" in 1 Chronicles 4:22 (BDB, 801b). Aramaic influence of this kind is, of course, credible even to those such as this exegete who, contrary to the critical assumptions of Brown-Driver-Briggs, date the Book of Job to the fifteenth century B.C. and assign Psalm 6 to King David. For the Aramaic language was already highly influential as a commercial language and then a diplomatic language throughout the Near East from very early times and had, indeed, been particularly connected with the history of the Hebrews from the time of the patriarch Abraham.

Thus, Brown-Driver-Briggs defines the Aramaic adjective used thrice in Daniel 7 as "advanced, aged, in days" (in verses 9, 13, and 22) (BDB, 1108a). In the latter two instances the phrase is made definite by the emphatic form of "days" (yomayya) by virtue of referring back to "the aforesaid Ancient One of the aforesaid days" introduced here in verse 9. The reason for the indefinite nature of the phrase here is that Daniel is using it as a technical term which is the equivalent of a name and, indeed, a divine name.

That the reference is specifically to God the Father appears clearly from His distinction from God the Son in verse 13. God the Father, to be sure, has no physical appearance and never takes a visible form in real life, but He can be represented in some symbolic way in visions of the apocalyptic genre of biblical literature. The First Person of the Holy Trinity is rightly called specifically the Ancient of Days because, firstly, even the Son and the Holy Spirit have each from eternity received His being from the Father, whether "begotten" by Him or "proceeding" from Him. In conjunction, secondly, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, God the Father antedates infinitely all His creatures which include all us men. By virtue, therefore, of His eternity and the similarly divine attributes of all-wise omniscience and all-holy justice which are inextricably connected therewith, the Ancient of Days is supremely qualified to judge all the members of the human race.

The phrase "even as" in the translation above renders a waw prefixed to a non-verbal word introducing a new clause. Here the word is an adjective, which, as any adjective in Aramaic (as in Hebrew), may be used as a noun. The substantival use of the adjective in such a way that it becomes the construct noun in a construct chain has already been discussed.

To return, however, to the significance of the conjunction introducing the clause, the "distinctive" use is the term which this exegete, at least, has come to apply to the particular variety of the disjunctive waw which is represented here. In this usus distinctivus (as in Biblical Hebrew) the clause which follows the waw contrasts in some way with the clause which precedes but less strongly than it would if the waw were fulfilling a completely adversative role. Here the contrast is between "thrones" in the plural being placed in a royal courtroom and the Ancient of Days taking His seat upon one of these thrones.

The whiteness of both vesture and hair is symbolic of the all-holy justice of the Ancient of Days already noted already. Psalm 51:9 (MT, verse 7) provides one well-known example of such imagery, where David is beseeching the Lord to pardon his sin:

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Even more clearly, however, is the eighteenth verse of the Book of Isaiah in the background of the verse before us now:

Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

For there (in Isaiah 1:18) one sees the same use as here (in Daniel 7:9) of wool as well as snow in utilizing whiteness as a figure of holiness in opposition to sin. That the whiteness of the hair of the Ancient of Day is symbolic of His holiness rather than of old age (as some imagine) clearly follows, of course, from the parallel whiteness of His robes.

Daniel himself again makes whiteness metaphorical of purity twice in the final vision of his book comprising chapters 10-12. Thus, in 11:35 he foretells the suffering which the faithful will endure "to try them and to purge and to make them white, even to the time of the end" (which is to say the era of the New Testament). In his final chapter, again, the Messiah gives this assurance to Daniel: "many shall be purified and made white and tried" (12:10).

Elsewhere, furthermore, in the apocalyptic literature of Holy Scripture, the Apostle John builds in many places on the aforesaid imagery in the first and final visions of Daniel. Thus, the Book of Revelation ascribes to Jesus Christ not only hair "white like wool" and "as white as snow" (1:14, as is here ascribed to His Father), but also a white horse (6:2 and 19:11), a white cloud (14:14), and "a great white throne" (20:11). St. John attributes the same spiritual whiteness to the people of God by virtue of the imputation of the holiness of Christ to those with faith in Him (2:17; 3:4, 5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13; 19:14). Of special significance is the description of the departed faithful in Revelation 7: "These are they which came out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (verse 14).

Likewise symbolic of the all-holy justice of the Lord is the fire which in the vision constitutes and propels His throne. Fire consumes most earthly things and was traditionally used to purify places and peoples of various contaminants. Fire is used, therefore, from one end of Holy Scripture to the other as a symbol of the presence of the All-Holy One. For His very holiness consumes all those who deviate from His holy will unless the holocaust of God Himself satisfy the demands of His uncompromising justice against them.

Examples of this symbolism already in the Pentateuch include the burning bush seen by Moses (Exodus 3:2) and the fire on Mount Sinai seen by all Israel (Exodus 19:18). Moses reminds Israel of the significance of the symbol in Deuteronomy 4: "For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God" (verse 24). The Epistle to the Hebrews ends with the same warning: "For our God is a consuming fire" (12:29).

Daniel and his readers were already familiar with the conception of a divine throne with wheels from the vision through which Ezekiel ben-Buzi received his call to the prophetic ministry (Ezekiel 1: 15-21; 3:13) and again from his vision of the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10 as the conclusion to the vision of chapters 8-10). These two visions were already received and described orally by the prophet Ezekiel in Babylonia in the years 593 and 592 B.C. respectively (as is argued in The Prophetic Books of the Babylonian Exile and the Persian Empire). The Book of Ezekiel as a whole, indeed, was published in all likelihood around 570 B.C., which is to say two decades previous to the vision relayed in Daniel 7.

An additional similarity between the first visions of Ezekiel and Daniel respectively is the importance of fire to the enthroned appearance of the Lord which has already been noted in the verses before us (comparing Ezekiel 1: 4-27). The one appearing to Ezekiel, to be sure, was specifically the Second Person of the Trinity, according to the general principle to which Daniel 7 is an exception. (As stated before, nevertheless, the exceptional representation of God the Father here is possible in biblical terms only in a vision as opposed in reality.)

We should, indeed, be much less certain of the significance of the wheels on the throne were it not for the emphasis upon them in Ezekiel 1. There clearly they symbolize the omnipresence of the Lord and so the universality of His kingship. This conception relates closely, of course, both to the role of God as judge of all humanity here in Daniel 7 and to the general theme of the Book of Daniel as a whole, that the God of Israel is in complete control of history.

10. A stream of fire was streaming forth And so was coming forth from before Him. A thousand thousands were ministering to Him; Yea, a myriad myriads were standing before Him. The aforesaid court was seated, Yea, books were opened.

Already, once again, the Prophet Ezekiel sees fire, as does Daniel here, not only within the throne of God, but also proceeding from Him. For Ezekiel speaks of fire "flashing forth" from the divine presence (1:4, NASB). Such language, indeed, can be found already in the Psalter. In Psalm 50 Asaph connects such fire specifically with the final judgment of the world (verses 3-4 and 6):

Our God shall come and shall not keep silence; A fire shall devour before Him, And it shall be very tempestuous round about Him.

He shall call to the heavens from above And to the earth that He may judge His people.... And the heavens shall declare His righteousness, For God is Judge Himself.

Psalm 97 speaks even more clearly of the purpose of the fire emanating from the Divine Judge: "A fire goeth before Him and burneth up His enemies round about" (verse 3). Here in Daniel 7 it is surely the fire streaming forth from the Lord which sets afire the body of the fourth beast and so of the little horn which receives its worldly power therefrom (verse 11).

The initial "yea" in the translation above assumes an explicative use of the standard conjunction introducing the new clause. The specific species of waw explicativum here is the emphatic epexegetical use, which is to be expected especially in poetry (as in Biblical Hebrew), by virtue of the repetition of the same or closely related ideas. The correspondence which is thereby created between a thousand thousands (one million) and a myriad myriads (a hundred million) shows that these numbers are to be understood figuratively as is true of the majority of numbers in the apocalyptic literature of the Bible. The idea here, specifically, is the impossibility of numbering the multitude of beings who stand before the throne of God and continually do His bidding. This multitude includes certainly the holy angels, but there is no reason to exclude the saints already in glory.

The emphatic suffix attached to din, so as to produce dina' ("the court"), is assumed to be serving its most common purpose in Biblical Aramaic, which is the same as the most common use of the definite article in Classical Hebrew. The determinative, in other words, is referring back to something already mentioned in the previous context ("the aforesaid court"). The reference here can only be to the Ancient of Days and the others who now take a place beside Him on the thrones specified as plural in the previous verse.

The Messiah, of course, is to be assumed on the basis of verses 13 and 14 as already seated at the right of God the Father. We know, indeed, from many passages elsewhere in both testaments of Holy Scripture that God the Son will serve as the spokesman of the Father and the Holy Spirit in the final judgment. Therefore do we confess of Him in all three of the ecumenical creeds that, as even now "He sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead" (to quote specifically the Apostolic Creed, with which the slightly differing words of the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed completely concur).

The saints of God too, however, are predicted to participate in the judging of faithless men and devils (1 Corinthians 6: 2-3). Here in Daniel 7 itself they receive "kingship and dominion" in a collective and derivative way by virtue of association with the King of Kings (verse 27). In the Apocalypse, therefore, the apostle sees the saints sitting on thrones and judging already in the millennium: "And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them" (Revelation 20:4). The participation, of course, of the saints in the final judgment will be only by way of concurrence in the justice and wisdom of the All-Holy Judge.

To be included, certainly, among the "books" opened in this vision is "the book" of the Messiah cited in Daniel 12 (verse 1), which is to say the enumeration of all those whom God has elected in Him to eternal salvation through faith in Him. Moses, in addressing the Lord, calls this enumeration in the mind of God "Thy book which Thou hast written" (Exodus 32:32, as similarly Psalm 139:16). The Messiah speaks in the same way of "the book of life" in which the "righteous" are "written" in Psalm 69 (verse 29 MT, 28 EV). Malachi refers to the "book of remembrance" "written before Him for the sake of those fearing of the Lord and those esteeming His name" (Malachi 3:16). The New Testament returns to the nomenclature of Psalm 69 with the "book of life" cited in the Letter to the Philippians (4:3) and the Book of Revelation (e.g., 20:12). The Apocalypse emphasizes the significance of this designation by stating the alternative to inclusion therein: "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (20:15). Such is the self-chosen end of the unbelievers "whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

The "books" specified here, however, in the indefinite plural also include the memory in the mind of God of all the works of all men. For St. John the Divine, in clearly building upon Daniel 7, makes a definite distinction between the book of life and other book opened at the time of the final judgment (Revelation 20:12a). The apostle describes the results in these words: "and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books according to their works. ...and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them, and they were judged every man according to their works" (Revelation 20: 12b-13).