

“A Little Horn”

The Fifteenth in a series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Daniel 8:1-27; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Who is Antiochus IV Epiphanes and why should we care? If we were Jews we would know the answer to this question immediately—Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabean Wars are the historical background of the Jewish holiday “Hanukkah” (which means “dedication,” or more specifically, “re-dedication”). The reason why we as Christians should care about Antiochus is because the prophet Daniel had a vision (a second, which is recounted in chapter 8), this time of a ram and a goat. But the “little horn” also reappears and his role is central in this vision, pointing us ahead to a future Antichrist. In this visionary dream, YHWH gives Daniel a prediction of yet another terrible time for the people of God then exiled in Babylon. This vision informs them that at some point before the dawn of the messianic age, yet after the exiles have indeed returned from Babylon to Judah to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and YHWH’s temple, the rebuilt temple will be desecrated by a “Little Horn,” who, in this vision, is none other than Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The temple will be cleansed and the altar rebuilt by Judas Maccabaeus, the famed Jewish rebel leader who recaptured Jerusalem from Antiochus’ forces and then restored the temple. This event, celebrated by Jews ever since (“Hanukkuh”), was foretold with uncanny accuracy by Daniel, and recounted for us in the 27 verses of the eighth chapter of the Book of Daniel.

This vision is important to us for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the accuracy of Daniel’s prediction of yet another terrible desecration of YHWH’s temple in Jerusalem. This desolation will occur long after the Jewish exiles then held in Babylon (at the time Daniel is given this vision), have, in the future, returned to Judah and are once again established in the land of promise. Daniel’s vision predicts the coming of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (some 350 years yet future to Daniel), but it also depicts him as a type (or a foreshadowing) of series of antichrist figures yet to come. As we saw in the vision recorded in Daniel 7, this series of antichrists includes the self-deifying emperors of Rome (the “Little Horn” of the fourth beast of the visions in Daniel 2 and 7), and which culminates in a final end times Antichrist foretold by the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2, our New Testament lesson.

As I have mentioned throughout our time in Daniel, critical scholars will simply not accept miraculous predictive prophecy, so they argue, a unnamed Jew living in Judah, writing as the “prophet” Daniel composed this book and at some point shortly after the Maccabean Wars (after 167 BC), because, critical scholars say, Daniel’s prophecy is far too accurate to have been given three and a half centuries prior to the events foretold. Yet Jesus, John, and Paul see Daniel’s visions as predictive prophecy with Jesus applying to himself the title “Son of Man” in the Olivet Discourse, John seeing Daniel’s fourth beast and its “Little Horn” as the Roman empire (Nero in particular), while Paul sees the “Little Horn” as a foreshadowing of an end-times Antichrist (the “man of sin”) and a final apostasy.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of Daniel’s vision in chapter 8, we begin with the historical events which Daniel predicted, before we take up the details of the prophecy. We do this to better understand the accuracy of the events foretold in Daniel’s vision. We begin with a brief history of Jewish temple from Daniel’s time until the days of the Maccabees. Then we will consider the career of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the Maccabean wars of 168-160 BC, before turning to Daniel’s vision (vv. 1-27 of chapter 8), which, as we will see, predicts these events in remarkable detail and accuracy.

As for the Jerusalem temple, as we saw throughout our study of Ezra-Nehemiah, the temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. Many of the Jewish inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem were taken into exile in Babylon. Daniel had been taken captive in 605 BC, so he was present when these exiles arrived in Babylon. No doubt, he heard first hand accounts of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Daniel also knew the prophecy of Jeremiah (specifically Jer. 25:11-12) in which the prophet foretold that the Jews would remain in exile in Babylon for 70 years. We have seen in the first half of Daniel's prophecy (chapters 1-6), that Daniel lived until the Jews were released to return home by Cyrus (Darius the Mede) in 538 BC. We also know from Ezra and Nehemiah that work on rebuilding the temple begun under Zerubbabel and was finally completed in 516 BC—the so-called “second” temple. During the days of Nehemiah, Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt and dedicated to YHWH in 444 BC.

Judah and Jerusalem remained under Persian control from that time until the days of Alexander the Great, who drove out the Persians from Judah and even threatened to destroy the temple in 332 BC when the Jews refused to honor him as a deity. Talked out of destroying the temple, Alexander died soon after (323 BC) with his kingdom divided into four parts, with the Ptolemies taking control of Judah and Jerusalem. The Ptolemies were Hellenized Egyptians (Greek in culture). Cleopatra (who died in 30 BC) was the last of the Ptolemaic rulers, who were soon after assimilated by Rome. The Ptolemies had little interest in Judah and Jerusalem, so while they ruled Jerusalem, there was a long period of relative peace.

In 198 BC a Seleucid king (Antiochus III) came to power, driving out the Ptolemies. The Seleucids ruled another of the four subdivisions of Alexander's Greek Empire to the northeast of Judah. As one of the staunchest defenders of Alexander's legacy, Antiochus III desired to turn the Jerusalem temple into a Greek pantheon. Refusing to go along with such blasphemy, the Jews revolted against Antiochus III's edict, but were quickly crushed, although Antiochus III soon lost interest in his temple remodel project. After his death, however, his son, Seleucus IV Philopator, came to power in 187, but was soon assassinated only to be replaced by his very zealous brother, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus IV immediately sought to implement his father's policies of Hellenizing the Jews—demanding they give up Jewish culture and worship, for Greek culture and worship of Greek gods. The Jews revolted again, leading to what we now know as the Maccabean Revolt, or the Maccabean Wars of 167-160 BC.

Antiochus banned Sabbath observance and circumcision throughout Judah (the very heart of Jewish religious practice). He also ordered that a statue of Zeus be erected in the temple courtyard so that Antiochus's priests could begin sacrificing pigs (regarded by the Jews as unclean) to Zeus on the altar previously used for sacrifices to YHWH. One of the high priests, a man by the name of Mattathias, was ordered to sacrifice one of these pigs to Zeus, but he refused, and then killed the Seleucid priest who ordered him to do so. The Jews rallied behind Mattathias and his five sons, which led this second, more successful revolt. One of these five sons was named Judas Maccabaeus (whose nickname was “the hammer”). It was he who led the Jews to drive out the Seleucids from Jerusalem. Judas Maccabaeus oversaw the cleansing of the temple, and by December of 164 BC, the altar was rebuilt and dedicated once again to YHWH. It is this tremendous victory and demonstration of faith and courage which the Jews celebrate down to this day as “Hanukkah.” It is this revolt and the coming of Antiochus IV Epiphanes which is foretold in the vision of a ram, a goat, and a “Little Horn” in Daniel 8.

Daniel tells us this vision was given him in the third year of Belshazzar's reign (about 548-547 BC). This was about the time that Cyrus defeated the Lydian king Croesus—the uber-wealthy king known for all his gold coins. This was Cyrus' last major conquest before defeating Babylon and killing Belshazzar in 539 BC as recounted in Daniel 5. Daniel's prophetic vision includes two common animals (not the scary creatures of Daniel 2 and 7). The ram and the goat represent the Persian and Greek empires

respectively. Babylon and Rome are omitted. There is also no mention of the coming Messiah, because this vision centers around a “Little Horn,” who comes on the scene before the messianic age, and who as it turns out, is none other than Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who blasphemes YHWH, desecrates the second temple, and who persecutes the people of God (the Jews).¹

Although this “Little Horn” is not the same “horn” figure associated with the fourth beast in the vision in chapter 7, Antiochus is also a type of antichrist, and anticipates both the rise of the little horn of the fourth kingdom (the self-proclaimed emperor deities of Rome), as well as the end-times Antichrist foretold by Paul in 2 Thessalonians. But Daniel’s vision in chapter 8 does not contain only bad news. God’s people are presently held in Babylon, but the vision reveals that the exiles will return home and rebuild their temple—a theme taken up again in the next vision (Daniel 9), before the coming of the Messiah, and the rise of the fourth beast (Rome). Yet, this vision also warns the Jews that the temple will be desecrated again, before YHWH rescues his people and restores his temple to its former glory.²

With these historical details in mind, we are in a good position to turn to the text of Daniel 8 and take up the details of this vision, which focuses upon the Greek period of rule over Judah and Jerusalem. In the opening verse of the chapter, Daniel gives us both the time and the setting of the dream. *“In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared to me, Daniel, after that which appeared to me at the first.”* The year is 547 BC and this was Daniel’s second vision. Daniel was in Babylon during this time, but the vision takes place in the winter capital of the Persian empire (Susa). He tells us in verse 2, *“and I saw in the vision; and when I saw, I was in Susa the citadel, which is in the province of Elam. And I saw in the vision, and I was at the Ulai canal,”* which is near Susa. This geographical information tells us that in Daniel’s vision (even though Belshazzar is still ruling in Babylon) the Persian empire has already risen to power (the second beast of Daniel’s and Nebuchadnezzar’s visions in chapters 2 and 7).

In verses 3-4 Daniel describes the first animal he sees. *“I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram standing on the bank of the canal. It had two horns, and both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward. No beast could stand before him, and there was no one who could rescue from his power. He did as he pleased and became great.”* Given the fact that Daniel was transported in his dream to Persia and the Ulai canal, the ram is easily identified as the Persian Empire. The two horns of the ram are the two earlier kingdoms which combined to form the Persian empire—the Medes were a people living on the Iranian plateau who dominated the Persians until the time of Darius the Mede (Cyrus), who united both kingdoms into the Medo-Persian, or simply the Persian Empire.

Even as Daniel was given this vision, Cyrus was directing Persian armies north toward the Caucasus Mountains, west into Asia Minor where the Persians had recently conquered the Lydian kingdom (Croesus) and south, into what is now the Persian gulf region where Iran and Iraq now share a border. The ram charging in three directions reflects the rapid expansion of the Persian empire (soon to defeat Babylon) as well as the fact that no beast (empire) could stand before Cyrus’ armies, which did whatever the king wished. This empire became great indeed.

In verses 5-7, Daniel sees another creature—a male goat which attacks and defeats the ram. Daniel

¹ Steinmann, Daniel, 389-391.

² Steinmann, Daniel, 389-391.

recounts, “*as I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. He came to the ram with the two horns, which I had seen standing on the bank of the canal, and he ran at him in his powerful wrath. I saw him come close to the ram, and he was enraged against him and struck the ram and broke his two horns. And the ram had no power to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled on him. And there was no one who could rescue the ram from his power.*” This is yet another visionary foretelling of the third empire of Nebuchadnezzar’s and Daniel’s prior visions. The goat is the Greek empire which arose suddenly under Alexander’s leadership, and which soundly defeated the Persians in a series of major battles in Asia Minor and what is now northern Iraq.

The speed of Alexander’s conquest is represented by the fact that the goat’s feet did not touch the ground. The decisiveness of Alexander’s defeat of large and well-equipped Persian armies at Granicus (Asia Minor) and Gaugamela (Iraq) is represented by the fact that when the goat struck the ram, the ram’s two horns were broken. But the goat’s decisive victory over the ram was not without consequence, as Daniel reports in verse 8. “*Then the goat became exceedingly great, but when he was strong, the great horn was broken.*” This which is a prophecy of Alexander’s death in Babylon at the young age of 32 (the cause of which is the subject of endless speculation, from poison to West Nile virus).

Alexander’s empire remained strong for more than a century after his death, also reflected in Daniel’s vision. After the horn was broken (Alexander’s death), “*instead of it there came up four conspicuous horns toward the four winds of heaven.*” This is a prophecy of the rise of four kingdoms from the divvying up of the Greek empire, two of which are the Seleucids (Seleucus was placed over Syria and Mesopotamia, which is modern Iraq) and the Ptolemaic (Ptolemy ruled over Egypt from Alexandria). We are immediately harkened back to the leopard with four heads of Daniel’s previous vision in chapter 7. In between these two empires lay the hapless province of Judea with its small kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. Whenever these two kingdoms fight with one another, Judah is caught in the middle. This difficult circumstance sets the stage of what follows—the return of the “Little Horn.”

In verse 9, Daniel recounts how “*out of one of them [i.e., one of the four horns] came a little horn, which grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land.*” This “Little Horn” arises from the remnants of the Greek empire (the third beast of the visions in Daniel 2 and 7), not from the fourth beast of the previous vision (which is Rome). This is compelling evidence that the “Little Horn,” while tied to a particular person at a particular point of time (Antiochus IV in 167 BC) is not an isolated threat. When this “Little Horn” appears here in chapter 8, his destruction does not mean that there will be no others to follow in his wake, imitating him. The “Little Horn,” will be followed by a series of other “horns.” These “Little Horns” are two different threats (Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second vision (chapter 8), the Roman Caesars in the first (Daniel 7)).³

The “Little Horn,” which grew strong, refers to Antiochus IV’s rise to power, and the reference to points south and east refers to his attempt to occupy the “glorious land,” a reference to Judah, and used elsewhere of Judah by Ezekiel (20:6, 15) and Jeremiah (3:19). The very name Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” points to his lust for power. The royal name which he gave himself “Epiphanes,” (“appearing,” i.e., “a divine manifestation”) indicates he thought of himself as a divine gift. He ordered the striking of coins which bore his image and identified himself as “King Antiochus, God Manifest.” Humble fellow. He began as a small, and seemingly insignificant figure when compared to Alexander, but grew large in the

³ See the defense of the “four kingdom” view in, Steinmann, Daniel, 144-157.

vision by his oppressive treatment of the Jews.⁴

According to verse 10, this horn “grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them.” “The host” likely refers to angels. The reference to the stars, perhaps, represent God’s people just as they do in Abraham’s vision in Genesis 15. As Daniel will go on to say in his final vision, (Daniel 12:3), “and those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” Antiochus tramples some of these stars, which refers to the people of God (the Jews at the time of the Maccabean wars) under his oppressive rule.

The “Little Horn” occupied Jerusalem, desecrated the temple, and tried to put an end to Sabbath observance as recounted in verses 11-12. Daniel tells us, the Little Horn “became great, even as great as the Prince of the host. And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown. And a host will be given over to it together with the regular burnt offering because of transgression, and it will throw truth to the ground, and it will act and prosper.” In Joshua 5:14-15 we read of a figure described as commander of the Lord’s army (the preincarnate Jesus), now identified by Daniel as the “prince of the host.” Disrupting the religious practices of the people of God, corrupting their sacrifices to YHWH, and seeking to replace the law of God with Greek and pagan customs and practices, topped off by his building of a statue of Zeus, the face of which, (and this will come as no surprise), resembled Antiochus himself—is a direct challenge to the authority of the Ancient of Days and the one like a Son of Man. To desecrate the temple where YHWH is to be worshiped is to attack YHWH himself.⁵ Antiochus’ efforts actually succeed for a time.⁶ He is truly an antichrist figure.

But how long will this go on? Will the Little Horn truly overcome YHWH’s people and ultimately ruin his temple? In verses 13-14, Daniel is given his answer when overhearing one angel speaking with another. “Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one who spoke, ‘For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?’ And he said to me, ‘For 2,300 evenings and mornings. Then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state.’” YHWH has set a limit to the horn’s action—at first glance a period of time just short of seven years (2,300 days). Some take this to refer a period of divine judgment (the trampling of the temple underfoot) which runs from 170 BC, the death of Onias III (the high priest), until Judas Maccabaeus cleansed the temple in December of 164.⁷

But the qualification “morning and “evening” seems to tie this “trampling underfoot” specifically to the cessation of the daily sacrifice for sin brought about by Antiochus’ actions, which instead makes this a period of 2,300 morning and evening sacrifices (two sacrifices a day), which is actually period of 1,150 days. This interpretation is confirmed, I think, in the next chapter when Daniel speaks of the angel Gabriel appearing to him at the time of the evening sacrifice (9:21). If this interpretation is correct, the time during which Antiochus prohibited sacrifices in the temple is exactly 1,150 days, which is an exact

⁴ Goldingay, Daniel, 209.

⁵ Baldwin, Daniel, 175.

⁶ Steinmann, Daniel, 403.

⁷ This is the view of Luther and Calvin, Goldingay, and Young.

time (which has been plausibly defended) or else a very close approximation of the time. One of these latter two seems to me to make the most sense.⁸ YHWH allowed Antiochus to disrupt the sacrifices for just over three years, before the sanctuary “*shall be restored,*” as it was by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 BC.

As is the pattern in these dreams so far (chapters 2, 4, 7), Daniel seeks an interpretation of what YHWH revealed to him. “*When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, I sought to understand it.*” Having already outlined the history of the Maccabean Wars, and Antiochus’ action as “Little Horn,” denouncing God’s Law, his temple, and his people, we are in a position to treat the interpretation given Daniel by none other than the Angel Gabriel. Picking up with the second half of verse 15-17, Daniel tell us, “*and behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. And I heard a man’s voice between the banks of the Ulai, and it called, ‘Gabriel, make this man understand the vision.’ So he came near where I stood. And when he came, I was frightened and fell on my face.*” Having Gabriel come near him and then speak, terrifies Daniel, and he collapses.

Gabriel reveals the time limit which God has set. “*But he said to me, ‘Understand, O son of man, that the vision is for the time of the end.’*” “The end” as used here, is not necessarily the last day when Jesus returns, but probably refers to the end of the 1,150 days (the number of days the horn tramples the temple), an event still some 350 years future to Daniel. The difficulty in grasping this becomes clear in verses 18-19, when Daniel explains “*and when he had spoken to me, I fell into a deep sleep with my face to the ground. But he touched me and made me stand up. He said, ‘Behold, I will make known to you what shall be at the latter end of the indignation,’ [the Little Horn’s desecration of the temple] for it refers to the appointed time of the end.*” “The end” of this particular vision (Daniel 8) is the restoration of the temple and the rebuilding of the altar and the renewal of daily sacrifices for sin in the temple.

In verses 20-23, Gabriel explains the role the two animals played in the vision given Daniel. “*As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king*” [Alexander]. *As for the horn that was broken, in place of which four others arose, four kingdoms shall arise from his nation, but not with his power [including the Seleucids and the Ptolemies]. And at the latter end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise.*” The Little Horn will be exceedingly clever (“bold in face”) in defeating his enemies.

In verses 24-25, Gabriel describes the horn as one whose “*power shall be great—but not by his own power; and he shall cause fearful destruction and shall succeed in what he does, and destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints. By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand.*” This is exactly what we have seen in the reign of terror of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a man who names himself “God manifest,” who makes a statue of Zeus to look like himself, and who wages a futile war on YHWH and his people by desecrating YHWH’s temple and ending the sacrifice for sin, all the while seeking to overthrow YHWH’s word and commandments, replacing them with Greek (pagan) practices. Paraphrasing the famous philosopher Dirty Harry, Antiochus IV Epiphanes “is a legend in his own mind.”

With the explanation complete (v. 26), Daniel obeys Gabriel’s final instructions. “*The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true, but seal up the vision, for it refers to many days*

⁸ Steinmann, Daniel, 405-406..

from now.” What he has seen has left him in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. *“And I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days. Then I rose and went about the king’s business, but I was appalled by the vision and did not understand it.”* After the last vision (chapter 8), the color left him and his head was alarmed. After this vision he was overcome and sick for days. Such is the life of a prophet.

What then, do we take with us by way of application? Again, this vision reminds us that YHWH’s prophets predict the future with great accuracy because YHWH is sovereign over all people and nations. A Persian and a Greek empire will arise. The Jews will return home and rebuild their city and YHWH’s temple. But there will come yet another time when YHWH’s people are persecuted (not seventy years in exile, but 2,300 mornings and evenings in their own land). YHWH’s temple will be desecrated by one who thinks of himself as a “god” and defies YHWH and his word. He will get what is coming to him.

But far from a passing despot long lost and buried in the annals of history, Antiochus IV Euphianes serves as a warning to us—that such historical figures who hate God and his people will arise throughout the future course redemptive history, eventually culminating in that one man about whom Paul warns us in 2 Thessalonians 2. This “man of sin” (a figure who makes Antiochus IV seem pious), will appear immediately before the day of the Lord—the day of Christ’s return. We know him by his title, “man of sin,” or “Antichrist.” Beginning in verse 3, Paul tells us, *“for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first [the apostasy], and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God [in the New Testament “temple” always refers to the church], proclaiming himself to be God.”*

Sound familiar? The man of sin’s fate will be same as that of his forbears (including Antiochus), the “Little Horn” of Daniel 8. Paul asks the Thessalonians, *“do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.”* Just as Antiochus came to power and was permitted to run amuck for a short time, only to meet his end, the same will be true for Antichrist. The difference is that Antichrist will be destroyed by Jesus himself, on that glorious day when our Lord returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. However fierce he may be, the “man of sin” is no match for that one like a Son of Man who has already defeated death and the grave by his bloody cross and his empty tomb. Our Savior Jesus has ascended to the very throne of heaven, where he rules all things and directs the affairs of people and nations. And with but a word (the breath of his mouth), Jesus will destroy the Antichrist and all those who do his bidding, on the day he is revealed (at his second advent), the day for which we long, and the day in which all our hope is realized.