MUTANTIS MUTANDIS
DANIEL 7 – 12

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It all began with the great medieval sage, and arguably one of the greatest Jewish minds of any era, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides as he is widely known, or by the Hebrew acronym Rambam.[1]

When I was an undergraduate, 50 years ago, I was introduced to the writing of Rambam, about whom I knew next to nothing beyond the name, epitomised by what is arguably the most famous of his 'letters', *Iggeret Teman*, for the Jewish community of Yemen. We read the letter in class, we discussed it with the lecturer, and we began to get a sense of the writer and the strong opinions he held. The story behind the letter is as follows:

A leader of the Yemenite Jewish community, Jacob ben Nathaniel, wrote to Maimonides and asked him for his guidance while the Jews of Yemen went through very trying times. A local Muslim prince was persecuting the Jews with the intention of forcing them to become Muslims, causing pain and distress within the community. This angst was exacerbated by a Jewish convert to Islam who asserted that there were texts in Tanakh that foretold Muhammad and his role. And the third pillar of distress for the Jews of Yemen was one of their number who had popped up and announced that he was the Mashiach!

Maimonides' response to this trifecta of torment is characteristically forthright. He encourages the Jews of Yemen to keep the faith, reminding them that being God's chosen is always likely to arouse jealousy in others; he ridicules the claims of the apostate about Muhammad and is caustic about Islam; and he inveighs against all those who obsess about trying to predict the precise advent of the Messiah.

And in a section concerning Islam, Maimonides states:[2]

> This event was predicted in the divinely inspired prophecy of Daniel, according to which, in some future time a person would appear with a religion similar to the true one, with a book of Scriptures and oral communications, who will arrogantly pretend that God had vouchsafed him a revelation, and that he held converse with Him, besides making other extravagant claims. Thus Daniel in his description of the rise of the Arabic kingdom after the fall of the Roman Empire, alluded to the appearance of the Madman, and his victories over the Roman, Persian and Byzantine Empires in the vision concerning a horn which grew, became long and strong.
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> This is clearly in a verse that can be understood by the masses as well as by the select few. Since this interpretation is born out by the facts of history, no other meaning can be given to the following verse: "I considered the horns, and behold there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first

[1] 1138-1204 CE.

[2] *A Maimonides Reader*, ed., Isadore Twersky, Behrman House Library of Jewish Studies, 1972, p.443.

> horns were plucked up by the roots; and behold, in this horn were eyes like human eyes, and a mouth speaking great things." (Dan.7.8)[3]

Chapters 7 – 12 in the book of Daniel are labelled as Daniel B by some scholars. They are described as being 'a product of the reign of Antiochus IV', as having different authors, as being firmly fixed in the genre of apocalypticism, as sharing imagery with other non-Jewish cultures in the region.

In his succinct entry on Daniel in the *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Professor Philip R. Davies notes that the stories in chapters 2 – 6, coming from the 2nd century BCE, have a 'relatively serene and optimistic mood', the visions in chapters 7 – 12 have a 'very different world view' where 'the succession of power is violent.[4]

Professor Harold L. Ginsberg, author of the entry on the book of Daniel in the 2nd edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, suggests that the hand of four apocalypticists may be discerned in chapters 7 – 12, and fixes them at different times after a rigorous analysis of regnal dates in the Seleucid empire.[5]

In the *Anchor Yale Bible*, the commentators on the Book of Daniel, Professors Alexander A. Di Lella and Louis. F Hartman state:[6]

> ... the authors and editors of the Daniel Apocalypses were raised up by God to console, strengthen, and exhort their co-religionists. The unflinching faith of these inspired men was firmly grounded in the divine power and will to rescue all who trusted in God and in his providence.

Whether you agree with this or not, and whether the next few days of study and debate convince you to maintain your view of the Book of Daniel or change it, only time will tell.

There is broad scholarly agreement that Daniel is, as Professor David Flusser asserted, 'the only apocalyptic book in the Hebrew Bible' and that 'its visions and symbols became the prototype for all later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings'.[7] He describes the term Apocalyptic as 'denoting the Jewish literature of revelations which arose after the cessation of prophecy and the Christian writings that derived from this Jewish literature'.[8]

And the purpose of apocalyptic writing?

> ... to reveal mysteries beyond the bounds of normal knowledge: the secrets of the heavens and of the world order, the names and functions of the angels, the explanation of natural phenomena, and the secrets of creation, the end of days, and other eschatological matters, and even the nature of God himself.[9]

So far so, almost, good, but there is, for me at least, a snag. I would describe myself as an empiricist rather than an apocalyptist, and so a great deal of Daniel 8 – 12, with its plodding and impenetrable imagery, supposed first person recollections, prophetic invective and mathematical complexity does not exactly make my spirit soar. Indeed it leaves me colder than an Emperor Penguin in the depths of an Antarctic winter and wholly empathetic with Maimonides' condemnation of apocalypticists, *tipach rucham shel mechashvey kitzin*, may the spirits of those who calculate the 'end times' blow out! Or as we might say, 'apocalypticists be blowed!'

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3 Madman is Rambam's less than flattering sobriquet for the Prophet.

4 *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds., Barton and Muddiman, OUP 2001, pp.563-571.

5 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol 5, pp.420-425.

6 *The Book of Daniel*, The Anchor Yale Bible, A new translation with introduction and commentary by Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, 1978, p.65.

7 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol 2, p. 257.

8 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol 2, pp.256-258.

9 Ibid.

The chapter that interests me the most is chapter 7, not, in truth because of the fun of identifying which Seleucid monarchs are being referred to, but because of the monsters that Daniel sees. Why? Because ever since I was two years old, the world of nature has been at the heart of my being, an unbroken golden thread that links toddler me to this geriatric who stands before you.

There are references to extremely large creatures elsewhere in Tanakh, *Tanninim* and *Livyatan* to be precise; *Livyatan*, described by the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* as Leviathan – sea creature, whether primeval, fantastic or huge; and *Tanninim*, described by the DOH, as sea monster, sea dragon.[10]

The monsters in Daniel are of a different type to the two previous creatures, which I identify with the whales that frequent the Mediterranean Sea.[11] They may look somewhat familiar, but then they are given extra dimensions not true to their biological form.

The monsters are as follows:

A lion, with two eagle's wings
A mis-shapen bear with three ?ribs/fangs in its mouth
A leopard with four birds' wings on its back and four heads
An indeterminate creature with ten horns and a subsequently appearing eleventh

That they come out of the sea in Daniel's vision just adds to the mystery and the terror, because three of the four do not belong in the ocean!

The reason that the first three beasts are cited must be that they were all indigenous to the region at this time. The African lion, *panthera leo*, had a wide spread in Neolithic times, as the map shows. *(Figure 1)*

The Syrian bear, *ursus arctos syriacus*, is native to the Middle East and West-central Asia. It is smaller than other brown bears, and its fur is a rather fetching honey blond colour. Small though it may be it can weigh up to 500 kg and has a standing height of above 4 and a ½ feet. Its current range, in the picture, is a pale imitation of its historic range. *(Figure 2)*

The leopard must be the, now very rare, Persian leopard, *panthera pardus tulliana*, historically widespread throughout the Middle east now restricted to a few pockets, as the map shows, and probably only 800-1000 individuals left in the wild. *(Figure 3)*

These three creatures, though familiar in the late centuries BCE, are nevertheless sufficiently different one from the other to recommend themselves as figures in Daniel's vision. So how, then, do we deal with the fourth creature. If each of the four is a mutant aberration we can still have a picture of the first three in our mind's eye, but how do we see the fourth? I tried to achieve this using AI, and these are the results: *(Figures 4 and 5)*

I must admit that while the lion was fine, and the bear sort of acceptable – and certainly terrifying – the AI struggled with the leopard. I either got the wrong number of heads and wings ... or the right number of wings but with extra heads! *(Figures 6 and 7)* I hope you agree with me that the second image is definitely frightening and deserving of the descriptor monster.

If AI struggled with Daniel's first three monsters however, it came apart with the fourth one. The actual words in Daniel didn't come up with anything even vaguely usable, so I took a bit of license and came up with this, which is certainly the stuff of nightmares. *(Figure 8)*

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[10] *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol iv, p.529; ibid. p.654.

[11] Fin whales, *Balaenoptera physalus*, (the second largest whale after the Blue), and Sperm whales, *Physeter macrocephalus*, together with several species of dolphin, can be found in the Mediterranean Sea.

We must ask ourselves though which came first, the concept or the image? The author uses animals, at least the first three, with which his contemporaries would have been familiar, but to convey an apocalyptic message they have to be made into monsters, kind of familiar but much more terrible. My hunch is that the animal came second, as a vehicle for the message, rather than the other way round. The interpretations are too easy for it to be convincing otherwise.

There is another really important dimension though to which I shall turn for the penultimate part of this presentation. What is it about monsters which makes them such a recurring type in human thought and literature?

The great American science and nature writer, David Quammen, in a 2004 book entitled *Monster of God: The Man-Eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind*, focussed on three very real creatures, the Indian Lion, the Saltwater Crocodile, and the Bengal Tiger. He calls them 'Alpha predators' whose awesome ability to kill and eat human beings had made them terrifying monsters in the fevered minds of those who lived near them.

Nevertheless, he starts with Job's Leviathan, which he calls 'the archetype of alpha predators' and describes as 'a long-toothed monster with armoured skin, fire-blasting mouth, smoking nostrils, heart firm as stone and a dim, smouldering gaze'.[12]

He suggests, and I rather approve the sentiment, that 'among the earliest forms of human self-awareness was the awareness of being meat'; and he adds that our fear of predation is partly 'a reminder of where we have stood, for tens of thousands of years, on the food chain of power and glory. That is not always and indisputably at the top'.[13]

We remember monsters from our childhood stories, trolls and dragons and shape shifters; in recent times the Pixar Studios made Monsters Inc. and Monsters University, bringing delight and a frisson of fear to children of all ages. Arguably, few have done more to introduce a range of new monsters than J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter stories, with their Hippogriffs, Thestrals, Botruckles, Knarls and Dragons, and of *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by the inimitable Newt Scamander which have introduced such monsters as Fwoopers, Thunderbirds, Mackled Malaclaws and Runespoors.[14]

Perhaps monsters are talked about more since many of us were sucked in to the world of magic, and perhaps some of us have been inspired to go further in our investigation of the monster phenomenon?

There are the medieval bestiaries with their bizarre creatures, a whole raft of illuminated medieval manuscripts containing mutant creatures, as well as the terrible beings that fill the pits of hell. The heraldic Parandus, the Yale, the Griffin, the Leucrota, the Bonnacon, the Basilisk and my personal favourite, the Amphisbaena.[15]

In a recent book (that I heartily recommend) called *Enchanted Creatures: Our Monsters and Their Meanings*, Dr Natalie Lawrence writes about human fears of existing animals and monsters that exist in the depths of the human mind. Some, such as Ophidiophobia, a disabling fear of snakes, which is incidentally the most common of all phobias, may be traced to our human evolution and

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[12] *Monster of God: The Man-eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind,* David Quammen, Hutchinson 2004, p.10.

[13] Ibid., p.3, 5.

[14] *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, J.K. Rowling / Newt Scamander, Bloomsbury, 2020, pp.45, 120,121, 80, 104.

[15] *Medieval Beasts*, Ann Payne, British Library, 1990; pp.46, 46, 28, 35, 35, 85, 88 (a two headed reptile, venomous at both ends).

particularly the very real fear that monkeys and small primates have of snakes. Others are similarly rooted in the natural world but then transmogrified into vast or terrifying distortions of themselves like Daniel's many horned beast.[16]

Lawrence writes:

> Now more than ever, when our relationship to nature is on the brink of collapse, we need to understand our monsters and what they say about how we interact with the world. We can't live in an ideal Eden. Like mother goddesses such as Tiamat and the snake women, nature is both wonderful and terrible, and so are we.
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> This book has explored how, over history, human beings frequently dealt with our darkness by projecting it outwards into nature – creating monsters from groups of people, other species or even landscapes which can be exterminated and conquered. The parts of ourselves we don't want to acknowledge can be ejected into other creatures, making monsters of wolves, snakes, sharks – even pangolins ... we're flawed creatures in a fractured world. We're integral to the biosphere as it exists now, and this is what we must sustain and replenish ... Perhaps, if we can turn the devils back into horned gods, accept the beasts inside ourselves, we will be able to find a way.[17]

So let us turn, finally to the Battle of the little Little horn, not quite as exciting as Custer's Last Stand but nevertheless intriguing.

I remember when I was studying at the Hebrew University, two years after the Yom Kippur war, that there were regular news items about evangelical Christians interpreting the horns of Daniel's dilemma and applying them to contemporary events. Maimonides too thought highly of Daniel's prophetic status and took his words seriously.

The 2nd century BCE dating of Daniel chapter 7 by scholars means that the horns are often identified with ten of the Seleucid kings, starting with Alexander the Great (who was a Macedonian not a Seleucid) and ending with Antiochus IV Epiphanes (who was a Seleucid).[18] That there is some artifice here is shown by the fact that there were more than ten kings between Alexander and Antiochus IV, the list identified by scholars leaves out Antiochus the son of Seleucus the Fourth who reigned for only 5 years, from 175-170 BCE, as co-ruler with Epiphanes. So we might say that a tradition was established a long time ago to selectively interpret these horns and the little one that caused havoc.

They can be ten kings who rule under the authority of the antichrist; or, according to the Adevntisttoday.org website:

> …the beast with ten horns is the United States of America. Horns represent kings, which is what the prophet, from his viewpoint, would call presidents. What United States president can be described as having "a mouth that spoke boastfully"? No POTUS in history has been the braggart that the current officeholder is. No president has been as self-important, nor as self-centered, nor as regardless of the needs of others. Thus we posit that the little horn of Daniel 7 is none other than Donald J. Trump. There has never been a United States president like him; of him could the prophet accurately say, "After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones" (24). It is significant that when the prophet saw the little horn in vision, he notes his mouth. Trump's bragging, pouting mouth is his most frequently caricatured feature.[19]

In the *Handwriting on the Wall*, the author states that the ten horns belong to ten Roman Emperors, because if Daniel is a true prophet then why not.[20]

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16 *Enchanted Creatures: Our Monsters and Their Meaning*, Natalie Lawrence, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2024, p.103.

17 Ibid., p.275-276.

18 Alexander the Great, Alexander Aegus, Seleucus 1, Antiochus 1, Antiochus 2, Seleucus 2, Seleucus 3, Antiochus 3, Seleucus 4, and Epiphanes. Yale Anchor Bible, p.214.

19 Adventisttoday.org; https://atoday.org/a-new-interpretation-of-the-little-horn-of-daniel-7/ .

20 *The Handwriting on the Wall: Secrets from the Prophecies of Daniel*, David Jeremiah with C.C. Carlson, Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2012, ad loc.

My preference is to interpret these horns in novel ways, and if someone has thought of these already do tell me but I've not found them anywhere else!

The horns could stand for ten ancient Empires: the Egyptian, Hittite, Assyrian, Carthaginian, Athenian, Macedonian, Persian and Sassanid, Roman and Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. The sharp eared among you will realise that there is sleight of hand here too, because I have left others out to fit the number! But identifying the little horn I leave to you and I will welcome suggestions!

Or they could stand for human evolution: *Australopithecus*, *Ardipithecus*, *homo habilis*, *rudolfensis*, *erectus*, *antecessor*, *Heidelbergensis*, *Floresiensis*, *Neanderthalensis*, and *naledi*. And the little horn? The one that causes so much trouble? *Homo sapiens*, of course!!

Similarly, the ten could stand for the evolutionary aeons: Cambrian, Ordovician, Silurian, Devonian, Carboniferous, Permian, Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous, and Paleogene-Neogene. And the 11th? It has several names, of which Quarternary is the most anodyne; an alternative that hits home better is Anthropocene, bested only, in the aftermath of the devastating wildfires in North America, the Amazon basin, the Arctic Circle, the Siberian taiga and elsewhere, the Pyrocene,[21] the epoch of *homo flagrans*.[22]

Writing to the embattled Jews of Yemen, the great polymath Moses Maimonides wrote:

> I have observed your statement that in your country science is little cultivated, and that learning does not flourish ... remember that this low state of learning and science is not peculiar to your country but is widely prevalent in Israel today.
>
> Indeed a divine premonition of such a state of affairs through Isaiah states: Truly, I shall further baffle that people with bafflement upon bafflement, and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the prudence of its prudent shall vanish. [Isa. 29.14][23]

Maimonides wrote those words in 1172, yet he could just as easily have written them today, when real science is undermined by quackery, and the search for wisdom and prudence becomes increasingly urgent.

The second half of the book of Daniel may add bafflement upon bafflement for us, but one thing I imagine we can all agree on, *mutatis mutandis*, whatever the mutant monsters of chapter 7 really mean is irrelevant, because the most terrible monster that any of us can face may be clearly seen ... every time we look in a mirror.

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[21] Steven J Pyne, emeritus professor at Arizona State University, author of *The Pyrocene: How we created an age of fire and what happens next*, University of California Press, 2021.

[22] *Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World*, John Vaillant, Sceptre, 2023, p.359.

[23] Twersky, p.453.

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