

The vision begins with the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea, a picture that would naturally suggest great cataclysms and upheavals in the world. Then he sees four beasts come out of the sea. These beasts are definitely symbolic, for one would never expect a lion, a bear and a leopard to come out of the sea. The final terrible beast, which is not specified by name, has ten horns, something that one would never expect in real life.

We are not told whether the four beasts came up one after another or simultaneously. There are two reasons for deciding that they followed one another: (1) the close parallel with the four kingdoms in chapter 2, which are presented as succeeding one another; (2) the fact that such a succession of four kingdoms agrees with the history of the following centuries.

As in the case of the metals in chapter 2, the designations of the first three beasts differ from one another, but do not in themselves shed light on the differences between these kingdoms. Any one of the first three kingdoms predicted in chapter 2 -- the Babylonian, Persian and Greek empires -- could reasonably be compared to a lion, a bear, or a leopard. These are powerful and destructive beasts and all these kingdoms would be strong and aggressive. Yet this vision, unlike chapter 2, includes a small amount of additional information about each of them.

The first beast was like a lion with eagle's wings. Since figures of lions and winged creatures often occur in the monuments erected by Assyrian and Babylonian rulers, this is a very good representation for Nebuchadnezzar's empire, though it would probably fit the character of either the second or third kingdom equally well. Although Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom is the center of attention, the lion probably represents the whole first period of empire, thus also including the Assyrian empire with its many conquests, especially since some of the Assyrian kings actually held a much larger territory under their control than Nebuchadnezzar did. This interpretation seems very probable in view of the great cultural and linguistic continuity involved.²