

Great Empires of Prophecy

Introduction

Daniel dismisses the four great empires of prophecy with scant notice, and focuses attention on the great future period of apostasy and persecution that was to culminate in the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. The great empires are mentioned primarily by way of providing a time bridge between Daniel's day and that far-off, future crisis.

Instead of taking up each of the visions separately—as is usually done in a study of Daniel—this lesson combines all of the information in all the visions for a more complete, composite picture, point by point.

"Prophecy has traced the rise and fall of the world's great empires—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. With each of these, as with nations of less power, history repeated itself. Each had its period of test, each failed, its glory faded, its power departed, and its place was occupied by another.

"While the nations rejected God's principles, and in this rejection wrought their own ruin, it was still manifest that the divine, overruling purpose was working through all their movements."—Education, page 177.

Babylon—Queen of Kingdoms

1. How is the Babylonian Empire portrayed in the dream of the metallic image? Dan. 2:32 (first part), 37, 38.

Babylon dominated the world scene from 605 to 539 B.C. Gold was an appropriate symbol for the New Babylonian Empire. In wealth and splendour it surpassed all its predecessors. Its capital city, Babylon, was the envy of the ancient world, and today its ruins mutely confirm the Scripture narrative. Its name became the symbol for riches and grandeur.

2. How is Babylon represented in the vision of the four beasts? Dan. 7:3, 4, 17.

The lion, the Babylonians' own favourite decorative motif, was an appropriate symbol for ancient Babylon. Babylonian art often combined the king of beasts and the king of birds into a composite creature, usually a lion with eagle's wings, and sometimes an eagle's claws and beak as well. A lion is noted for its strength and an eagle for its powerful wings and swift flight, a fit allusion, here, to Nebuchadnezzar's brilliant conquests. Various Bible writers refer to him as a "lion."

The Splendour of Persia

3. What part of the metallic image stands for the Persian Empire? Dan. 2:32 (second part), 39 (first part).

Persia appears in four of the five prophetic passages of Daniel (chapters 2, 7, 8, and 11). The fifth (chapter 9) covers the Persian era as well as the eras of Greece and Rome, but without mentioning or alluding to any of them. Persia, which eventually controlled a considerably larger territory than Babylonia, ruled the world from 539 to 331 B.C.

4. What additional information about Persia is provided by the vision of, the four beasts? Dan. 7:5.

The second beast, the bear, stood for Persia, which followed Babylonia. Daniel saw that it "raised up itself on one side." This unusual posture is doubtless a reminder of the historical fact that the Persian Empire was, in truth, a union of Media and Persia, though by the time Babylonia fell to Persian arms, Persian influence had become dominant and that of Media gradually vanished. Daniel also saw "three ribs in its mouth between its teeth," which spurred it on to "devour much flesh." It has been suggested, appropriately, that these three ribs represent conquered countries such as Babylonia, Lydia, and Egypt.

Each new victory naturally spurred the Persians on to ever greater conquests, until eventually their empire extended from central Asia to Egypt and from India into Europe—3,300 miles from east to west and 1,500 from north to south. It is less than 2,500 air miles from New York to San Francisco. Persia certainly did "devour much flesh," far more than any nation that was before it.

5. How is Persia pictured in the vision of chapter 8? Dan. 8:3, 4, 20.

6. What further facts concerning Persia are given in chapter 11? Dan. 11:2-4.

Cambyses, the False Smerdis, and Darius I followed Cyrus on the throne of Persia. The fourth was Xerxes (the Bible Ahasuerus), who led the great invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.

The Glory of Greece

7. What part of the metallic image stands for Greece? Dan. 2:32 (last part), 39 (last part).

Alexander's conquests diffused Greek language and culture throughout the eastern Mediterranean world and the ancient East, from about 331 B.C. to 168 B.C. Greek influence constituted the unifying force that bound the kingdoms of his successors together in one great civilization.

"The prophecy represents the kingdom of Greece as following Persia, because Greece never became united into a kingdom until the formation of the Macedonian Empire, which replaced Persia as the leading world power of that time."—S.D.A. Bible Commentary, on Daniel 2:39.

8. How is Greece represented in the vision of the four great beasts? Dan. 7:6.

9. What further information is given about Greece in chapter 8? Dan. 8:5-8, 21, 22.

The eighth chapter identifies Greece as the successor of Persia, not the Greece of the classical period, which was contemporary with Persia, but the Greece of the time of Alexander the Great and after. The symbols of chapter 8 are altogether different from those of chapter 7, but the correspondence between the ram and the he-goat of the one and the bear and the leopard of the other is so close as to leave no doubt that the same powers are represented in both. Both, for instance, present the dual aspect of the Medo-Persian Empire, and the fact that one of the two component nations eventually dominated the other. Both likewise envision a fourfold division of the power identified in chapter 8 as Greece.

10. What is said of Greece in chapter 11? Dan. 11:2-4.

The eleventh chapter presents a detailed outline of the Hellenistic era of Greek history. Like chapter 8, it identifies Greece by name, and mentions its first "mighty king" and a subsequent fourfold division. In verses 5 to 15 the number of contestants for Alexander's dominions is narrowed down to the "king of the north" and the "king of the south," and in

verse 16 the former prevails over the latter. The detailed preview of Greek history given in chapter 11 need not detain us here.

The Grandeur of Rome

11. What part of the metallic image represents Rome? Dan. 2:33, 40.

Daniel identifies three of the four great empires of antiquity by name— Babylon, Persia, and, Greece. Rome is not thus clearly identified; nevertheless, in a unique way the Roman Empire fulfilled the prophetic specifications for the fourth power represented as following Greece, and we assume, on the basis of history, that it is the nation here intended.

Iron was an appropriate symbol for the Roman Empire. Her famed legions ranged at will over the entire Mediterranean world and over practically all of Western Europe and much of western Asia as well. As Daniel had predicted, Rome literally crushed all other nations, to become by all odds the largest and strongest empire the world had ever known.

12. How is Rome represented in the vision of the four beasts? Dan. 7:7, 19, 23.

As in the metallic image of Daniel 2 the iron followed the bronze, here in Daniel 7 "a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible and strong exceedingly," with "great iron teeth," follows the leopard. Like iron, the fourth metal of Daniel 2, which is said to break to pieces, shatter, and crush all things, the fourth world power of chapter 7 was to "break and crush" all others.. A more fitting figurative description of the invincible Roman legions marching to and fro over Europe and the Mediterranean world could hardly be imagined.

13. Under what symbol is Rome represented in the eighth chapter? Dan. 8:9, 23-25.

There is no clear counterpart in Daniel 8 for the fourth, fearful beast of Daniel 7. The "little horn" of chapter 8 apparently plays the combined roles of both the fourth beast and the little horn of chapter 7. In chapter 8, for instance, the little horn elicits the same concern Daniel felt for the fourth beast of chapter 7. Furthermore, the same fearful destruction that chapter 8 attributes exclusively to the little horn, the seventh chapter attributed to the fourth beast instead of to its little horn. The fourth beast of chapter 7 and its little horn exist together to the close of time. They are judged and destroyed together, the fourth beast being punished for the "great words" its little horn speaks. In chapter 8, however, the beast representing Greece disappears before the little horn comes upon the stage of action.

14. What is said of Rome in its divided state? Dan. 2:33, 41-43; 7:7, 20, 24.

The old power struggle for the control of Western Europe continues unabated. The fateful words of the prophet, "they will not hold together", are as accurate a description of the fragments of ancient Rome today as they were fifteen centuries ago. Modern political technology has found no way to fuse the iron and clay of Nebuchadnezzar's image together.

Multiple Fulfilment

In Daniel 2, five kingdoms are depicted, though the chapter itself specifically identifies only two: the first, Babylon (vss. 37, 38), and the last, God's kingdom (vs. 44). However, as we'll see in greater detail later, Daniel 7 and Daniel 8 cover much of the same ground, only from different perspectives. Also, in those two chapters, two more of the five kingdoms are named.

Read Daniel 8:20, 21. What two kingdoms, already discussed in yesterday's study, are specifically named?

If we were to chart the kingdoms depicted, and specifically named, in Daniel, the outline would look like this:

Babylon (Dan. 2:37, 38)

Media-Persia (Dan. 8:20)

Greece (Dan. 8:21)

Fourth kingdom

God's eternal kingdom (Dan. 2:44)

Read Daniel's own interpretation of the vision (Dan. 2:37-45).

Do you see anything there indicating that these prophecies can have different meanings in different times?

Though the fourth kingdom is not named, only one power can possibly fit (more on this later). However, of the five kingdoms depicted, four are named. The prophecy says absolutely nothing about their having multiple fulfilment; that is, the kingdoms symbolizing one thing in one era, another thing in another. Considering what named — massive empires is immovably and immutably rooted in world history itself—the idea that we can somehow give these specific prophecies here in Daniel different fulfilment in different eras certainly doesn't arise from anything in the texts themselves. In short, there is absolutely no justification for the idea that this prophecy is open to different fulfilment in different times in history.

We live in a world in which things are, inherently, unstable. The ground, in an instant, can crumble beneath our feet. The past, though, is unchangeable, immovable. Look at how solid a foundation God has given us with this prophecy. How can you use what's been depicted here to strengthen your own faith?