

The Four Kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7

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The visions of Daniel and world history

My basic thesis with regard to Daniel's prophecies¹ is that Daniel was primarily looking forward to the first coming of Christ. He predicted both the historical setting (in chapters 2, 7, 8, 11 and 12) and the date (in chapter 9) of the first advent.

The 'four kingdoms' of Daniel 2 and 7 are, I believe, to be identified with Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece. The Greek empire is described in special detail because it immediately preceded the kingdom of heaven. Christ was born around 6 BC, very soon after the final obliteration of the Greek empire in 27 BC, when Egypt was made a Roman province. The destruction of the Greek empire was the first step in the process of setting up the kingdom of heaven, and it began in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. In fact the special sign that God had begun to destroy the fourth kingdom—and so begun the process of establishing the kingdom of heaven—was probably the death of Antiochus Epiphanes himself.

As I pointed out in an earlier article,² Daniel 11: 2 describes the first four powerful kings of Persia, from Cyrus to Xerxes, corresponding to the four heads of the third beast in chapter 7; and 11: 3-39

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is a detailed description of the Greek empire from Alexander to Antiochus Epiphanes, corresponding to the specially important fourth kingdom. I suggested that verses 40-43 are a description of the destruction of the Greek empire by Rome, corresponding to the destruction of the body of the fourth beast in Daniel 7: 11, 26. To be more precise, they describe the annexation of Syria by Scourus and Pompey. I also suggested that verses 44 and 45 describe the unsuccessful campaign of Crassus against the Parthians in 54 BC.

In the previous verses 'the king of the north' has always been a Greek king of Syria. The words 'at the time of the end' (verse 40) indicate, however, that the identity of the king of the north has changed. Daniel has already shown that at the time of the end Greece will be destroyed, following the death of Antiochus Epiphanes, and that this will precede the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Since this section follows a description of Antiochus Epiphanes, precedes a description of the kingdom of heaven and is introduced by the words 'at the time of the end', we should expect it to concern the destruction of Greece. If we take it that it is describing this, it is reasonable to assume that the destroying 'king of the north' here is some new non-Greek character. In view of the fact that the description does not apply to any Greek king of Syria, but does apply perfectly to the nation which destroyed the Greek empire, one might say it is more than reasonable. The correct

¹ I have elaborated this in a book on Daniel's prophecies which I hope to publish in the near future.

² 'A Note on Daniel 11: 40-45' in *TSEBulletin* 47 (1967), pp. 10-12.

translation throughout the chapter should be *a* king of the north, not *the* king of the north. The phrase simply indicates a king to the north of Israel. The period of history between verses 39 and 40 is irrelevant and therefore not described (*cf.* the gap in time between Xerxes and Alexander, 11: 2, 3).

The final two verses of chapter 11, which describe the unsuccessful campaign of Crassus against the Parthians, are relevant for at least two reasons: (a) they show that the fourth kingdom was *not* the Roman empire, and (b) they explain how Daniel 7: 12 was fulfilled.

(a) *They show that the fourth kingdom was not the Roman empire.* Firstly, they draw attention to the fact that the Roman armies were not invincible. In this case Rome was badly defeated when still in her prime and her empire still expanding. Secondly, they draw attention to the fact that the Romans did not by any means tread down 'the whole earth'. The Parthians ruled a very large part of the former Babylonian, Median, Persian and Greek empires, and in the context of the book of Daniel 'the whole earth' must surely include the area covered by those empires. The Roman empire was essentially an empire of the West, and Palestine lay right on its eastern border. All the land to the immediate east of Palestine (including Babylonia, Media and Persia) lay outside the Roman empire. Trajan did have some success against the Parthians many years after the time of Christ (and after the establishment of the kingdom of heaven) and he incorporated part of their empire into the Roman empire; but his successor Hadrian immediately abandoned these conquests. Most of the Median empire and about half of the Persian and Greek empires were never at any time within the Roman empire. Media and Persia themselves were never within the empire.

(b) *They explain how Daniel 7: 12 was fulfilled.* Because of Rome's failure against Parthia, *Babylonia, Media and Persia all remained outside the Roman empire.* Their dominion was taken away, but they were independent of Rome.

Radical authors always identify the four kingdoms as Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece, while conservative authors usually identify them as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. One of the reasons radical scholars give for their belief in a second century BC date of authorship is the fact that the Greek empire is described very accurately and in much greater detail than the preceding empires. They believe that Daniel's first three kingdoms are supposed to represent Babylon, Media and Persia, but that his description of them is inaccurate. I believe that both the radicals and the conservatives have missed the truth. Daniel's four kingdoms are an *accurate*, true-to-history description of the Babylonian, Median, Persian and Greek empires. Conservative scholars claim that a major objection to this interpretation is found in the statement that the heavenly kingdom was to be set up 'in the days of those kings' (Dn.2: 44), whereas Christ was born *after* the destruction of the Greek empire. I suggest, however, that the fourth kingdom was destroyed by *the pre-incarnate Christ*, and this destruction was part of the process of setting up the kingdom of heaven. A key verse supporting this interpretation is Daniel 8: 25 (*cf.* Dn. 2: 34; Rev. 17: 14; 19: 16).

This interpretation does justice to both visions. The vision of the image indicates that the setting up of the heavenly kingdom *began* with the destruction of the fourth kingdom—the stone struck the feet of iron and clay *before* it became a mountain and filled the earth. The vision of the four beasts indicates that the fourth kingdom was destroyed *before* the 'one like a son of man' received the kingdom. Many passages in the

New Testament indicate that these visions (of the stone becoming a mountain and the one like a son of man receiving

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the kingdom) found their primary fulfilment around the time of *the first advent* (Mt. 16:28; 26: 64; 28: 18; Lk. 22: 69; Acts 7: 56; Rom. 8: 16, 17; 1 Cor. 15: 24-28; Eph. 1: 20-22; 2: 6; Heb. 1: 3; 1 Pet. 3: 22; Rev. 1: 5, 6; 3: 21; 5: 9-13 RV; 12: 5).

This interpretation also does justice to the fact that the fourth kingdom is so detailed and accurate a picture of the Greek empire, that radical scholars believe the author lived during the time of that empire after the events had taken place. It also does justice to the visions of chapters 8, 11 and 12, where the Persian and Greek empires and Antiochus Epiphanes are described, the descriptions corresponding very closely indeed to those of the third and fourth kingdoms and the 'little horn' in chapters 2 and 7. In chapters 8, 11 and 12 Persia and Rome are mentioned only very briefly, whereas Greece and Antiochus Epiphanes are described in immense detail. Likewise, the fourth kingdom and its 'little horn' are described in far greater detail than the other kingdoms, and Daniel takes a special interest in them (7: 19, 20).

This interpretation also agrees with the way in which the Median origin of 'Darius the Mede' is emphasized (5: 31; 9: 1; 11: 1), and the way in which he is depicted as the successor of the kings of Babylon (I am *not* saying that the kingdom of Darius *was* the Median kingdom—I am merely suggesting that the book of Daniel uses Darius to get across the idea that Media was the second of the four world powers).

This interpretation also gives full weight to the twice-repeated statement that the vision of chapter 8 concerns 'the time of the end' (8: 17, 19; cf. 11: 35, 40 and 12: 1-4), as well as to the New Testament passages which indicate that 'the time of the end' and 'the last days' began around the time of *the first advent* (Lk. 18: 31; 21: 22; Acts 2: 15-17; 3: 24; Heb. 1: 1, 2; 9: 26; 1 Pet. 1: 20).

So much for the basic thesis. In the following paragraphs.³ I shall seek to show that Daniel's first three kingdoms are accurate, true-to-history descriptions of Babylon, Media and Persia. I shall not deal with the fourth kingdom in detail, because the way in which it corresponds to the Greek empire is already well known and has been described by many authors.

The image (Dn. 2)

The image has a head of gold, and Daniel interprets it as follows: 'You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the sons of men, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold.' Thus we are told that the head of gold represents *Nebuchadnezzar*, king

³ Most are taken, in slightly modified form, from my book.

of Babylon. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon rose to a position of great power, wealth and magnificence.

The breast and arms of this image are of silver and Daniel interprets as follows: 'And after you shall arise another kingdom inferior to you'. In my opinion, Daniel is here describing the Median empire. This empire was contemporaneous with the Babylonian empire, but after the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC *it became the stronger of the two*, because the power and wealth of Babylon immediately declined. Babylon was still a power, but the scales had tipped in favour of the Medes. Remember that the head of gold symbolizes Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel says, 'And after you (Nebuchadnezzar) shall arise another kingdom inferior to you.' Following the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Media was the major power for at least twelve years until it was united with Persia in 550 BC under the rule of Cyrus. The Median empire did not, however, have the glory and magnificence of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon—it was of *inferior* quality.

It is often objected that the Median empire did not really follow after the Babylonian empire—it was contemporaneous with it. It may be replied, however, that the order of Daniel's kingdoms is *the order of their rise to the height of power and prominence*. Daniel does not say that each kingdom exists only from the time of destruction of the preceding kingdom to the time of its own destruction. The order of the kingdoms is *not* merely the order of their existence—it is the order of their occupation of the seat of supreme power: in other words, the order in which they held the title of 'top nation'! This is confirmed in the vision of the four beasts, because we learn there that after the fourth kingdom has been destroyed, the first three kingdoms continue to exist for a while *together*, although their dominion is taken away from them. This clearly indicates that they are to some extent contemporaneous.

The assertion that there was no Median empire between the Babylonian and Persian empires seems to be based on a misconception. This misconception is the idea that Persia succeeded Babylon as dominant world power when it overthrew Babylon in 539 BC. Persia in fact became the dominant world power some years *before* Babylon fell. Cyrus built up a very large and powerful empire which outstripped the Babylonian empire several years

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before he got round to conquering the latter empire. If it be admitted, and so it must, that Persia became dominant world power before the actual fall of Babylon, it can also be admitted that Media may have been the dominant world power before Persia.

Babylon and Media were the two great rivals for world power, and after the death of Nebuchadnezzar, it seemed inevitable that Media would overthrow Babylon. This was the state of affairs for a few uneasy years. But suddenly, events took an unexpected turn. Media's king was overthrown by one of his own vassals, the brilliant Persian king, Cyrus. Cyrus united the Medes and Persians as allies under his own rule; but from this time Persia was on the ascendant. For some years the two peoples held the reins of power together; but the Persians had the edge on the Medes and increased their power until they were completely dominant.

Daniel continues the interpretation as follows: '...and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth'. The third kingdom is symbolized by the image's belly and thighs of bronze and is to 'rule over all the earth'. The characteristic of this third kingdom is the immense area over which it rules. This is the perfect description of the Persian empire, because the most striking aspect of that empire was the huge area it covered—it was by far the vastest empire the world had seen. The following Greek empire was in fact slightly smaller than the Persian empire. In all regions except Greece and across the Indus river, Alexander's Greek empire either fell short of or failed to extend beyond the limits of the Persian empire.

Cyrus himself created the largest empire the world had seen up to that time; but his successors continued to push the frontiers outwards until the Persian empire was truly breathtaking in size. In a series of brilliant campaigns Cyrus annexed the entire Median empire, the large and powerful kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor, much territory in the East—and then the Babylonian empire. His successors added all Egypt, a chunk of Europe and more territory in the East.

Note also the way in which Daniel groups together the second and third kingdoms. The second kingdom is passed over quickly with a brief and belittling remark, possibly indicating that its term of supreme power is comparatively insignificant and short-lived, as well as being inferior in wealth and magnificence. It is grouped with, and closely followed and overshadowed by, the world-ruling third kingdom. The whole description is strongly suggestive of the Medo-Persian situation, because the comparatively insignificant Median empire was absorbed and eclipsed by the subsequently enormous Persian empire only a very short time after it (Media) had itself surpassed Babylon. The description of the second and third kingdoms fits the Median and Persian empires far better than it fits the huge, wealthy, long-lived Persian empire and the rather smaller Greek empire.

The four beasts (Dn. 7)

Daniel recounts, 'The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand upon two feet like a man; and the mind of a man was given to it.'

The winged lion is familiar in Babylonian art. The eagle was a symbol of swiftness and the lion one of strength and nobility (2 Sa. 1: 23). The eagle was the king of birds, and the lion the king of beasts. They correspond to the image's head of gold, the metal which was regarded as the noblest and most valuable of all metals. Almost all are agreed that this beast represents Babylon and that the change which comes upon it probably symbolizes Nebuchadnezzar's madness and subsequent restoration (Dn. 4). Note that again Babylon *in the time of Nebuchadnezzar* is strongly indicated. The Bible repeatedly describes Nebuchadnezzar and the Chaldeans of his time as being like both an eagle (Dt. 28: 49-53, cf. 2 Kings 25: 1-11; Je. 49: 19, 22; La. 4: 19; Ezk. 17: 1-5, 11-14; Hab. 1: 6-8) and a lion (Is. 5: 25-30; Je. 4: 6, 7, 13, cf. 25: 9, 38; 49: 19, 22; 50: 17, 44). These creatures were used to convey a picture of Nebuchadnezzar coming from afar against the Jews and their neighbours and carrying them off as captives to Babylon. The book of Daniel always

associates the glory and magnificence of Babylon with *Nebuchadnezzar* (Dn. 2: 37, 38; 4: 22, 30, 36; 5: 18, 19).

It is a historical fact that Nebuchadnezzar was largely responsible for the glory of the Neo-Babylonian empire. He came to the throne when his father died in 605 BC, soon after the final obliteration of Assyria—an event which Nebuchadnezzar helped to bring about. During his long reign of 43 years, Babylon was practically invincible. Moreover, he lavished immense wealth and architectural skill on his capital city, making it world-famous for its magnificence and strength. Nebuchadnezzar was both a great soldier and a great builder. After his death, however, a series of relatively weak kings followed each other in rapid succession and Babylon's power declined. She was still a power, but whereas she formerly had the edge on her

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great rival, Media, the position was now reversed. Daniel continues, 'And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side; it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, "Arise, devour much flesh."' Although the bear is not so swift as the lion, it was equally feared, owing to its great strength and the unpredictability of its actions. The lion and the bear are mentioned together a number of times in Scripture (1 Sam. 17: 34; Prov. 28: 15; La. 3: 10; Am. 5: 19), and both were clearly objects of special fear and respect. In a similar way the rival powers of Babylon and Media together commanded the nations' fear and respect. The bear is a comparatively slow-moving and clumsy creature; therefore this symbol applies better to the Median empire than to the Persian. The career of Cyrus the Persian was characterized by a succession of swift and brilliant victories, better symbolized by the next beast, which is a leopard.

We are told that the bear 'was raised up on one side', and I suggest the following explanation. *Media's period of power was divided into two very different stages.* During the first stage she was the powerful head of a large empire—this is represented by the side of the bear which is raised up. During the second stage she was the somewhat inferior partner of Persia—Daniel is careful to emphasize (chapters 5, 6 and 8) that the Medes and Persians *ruled together as allies* for a number of years following Cyrus's victory over the Median king in 550 BC. This part of Media's reign is represented by the lower side of the bear. During her partnership with Persia, *she was still ruling the nations*, but in a humbler capacity than before. Her partnership with Persia constituted the world's most powerful empire; but despite the exalted nature of her continued ruling of the nations, it was not as exalted as it had been before the rise of Persia.

We are told that three ribs were in the bear's mouth between its teeth, and that it was commanded, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' It is generally agreed that the three ribs must represent three nations conquered by the bear, and that the bear is ordered to arise and make fresh conquests. The identities of the three nations, however, have remained in doubt. The Bible itself, as is so often the case, provides the answer. We find it in Jeremiah 51: 27-29. In this passage God stirs up four nations against Babylon. This reminds us that the bear with the three ribs was also stirred up—and probably against Babylon. Three of these nations were the small kingdoms of Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz. They all lay to the north of Babylon and *all were within the Median empire.* The fourth

nation was the Median empire itself. The bear with the three ribs between its teeth is a perfect picture of the Median empire and the three small subject kingdoms of Ararat, Minni and Ashkenaz. Note that *Media* is the principal nation stirred up against Babylon. In the eleventh verse of the same chapter we read, 'The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it.' In Isaiah 13: 17 we read, 'Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them (the Babylonians).' We can see therefore that the prophets repeatedly proclaimed that God would stir up the Medes against Babylon. This is the meaning of the command to arise and devour much flesh. In Isaiah 21: 2 Elam and Media are ordered to besiege Babylon, and in verse 9 the fall of Babylon is proclaimed. By the time Media got round to actually besieging Babylon, it had become the inferior partner of Persian-occupied Elam, Cyrus's country of origin. (Elam is not mentioned in Je. 51:27, because although it was a vassal of Media, it formed an alliance with Babylon during the period of Media's primacy.)

Thus the general picture we have is that Media became stronger than Babylon on the death of Nebuchadnezzar and planned to overcome her, being stirred up to this by God. But before Media was able to carry her plans into effect, she was joined and surpassed by Persia.

Daniel continues, 'After this I looked, and lo, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back; and the beast had four heads; and dominion was given to it.' The swift and agile winged leopard contrasts vividly with the slow-moving, clumsy bear. Such was the contrast between the ponderous Median empire and the brilliant, swiftly-moving armies of Cyrus the Persian. The early kings that followed Cyrus were not as brilliant as he, but they certainly moved much faster and more purposefully than the Medes.

Now the main characteristic of this third kingdom is, like that of the 'bronze' kingdom, one of widespread authority or 'dominion', which was the chief characteristic of Persia. This is shown by the four wings symbolizing the four winds, one for each of the 'four corners of the earth' (Ps. 104: 3; Zc. 2:6). On a clay cylinder, Cyrus described himself as 'king of the four corners of the earth'. On another he said, 'Sin, the light of heaven... gave into my hands the four corners of the earth.'

The beast had four heads. Now a head naturally suggests a king or some similar authority. In the eleventh chapter of Daniel we are specially told about *four kings of Persia*. The first is Cyrus and the fourth is Xerxes. This interpretation of the

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meaning of the four heads is eminently suitable, because Persia's main period of expansion and aggression only covered the reigns of these first four kings—Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius and Xerxes (Pseudo-Smerdis being merely a short-lived impostor). Between them these first four kings created the Persian empire in all its vast extent and wealth; and it was after the reign of Xerxes that the decline of the empire began. Xerxes' small gains in Greece were lost within a few months; but the empire reached the pinnacle of its power, wealth and size during his reign. Each of these four kings had a part to play in the creation of this enormous empire. It was not the work of one man, and the four-headed beast is a perfect picture of this.

Note that the four heads have nothing to do with the four horns of Greece (8: 8). The four heads appear to be a feature of the beast's great dominion, whereas the four horns of Greece are connected with a loss of dominion (*cf.* 11: 4). In 11: 2-4 the number four is mentioned twice—once in connection with Persia, and once with Greece. The reference to Persia speaks of an initial phase of riches and power, whereas the reference to Greece speaks of a second phase of division and loss of territory and power. If the third kingdom is the Persian empire, it also follows that the unequal horns of the Persian ram (8: 3-4, 20) do not signify the same thing as the unequal sides of the bear (7: 5). There is a connection, however, since in both cases the inequality has something to do with the partnership between the Medes and Persians.

We can see therefore that whatever resemblance the third beast might have to any other empire, it was fulfilled in every respect by the Persian empire. Let it again be pointed out that the only thing said about the beast's rule was the fact that it was to have dominion—which corresponds to the statement that the bronze kingdom was to 'rule over all the earth'. This was by far the most striking aspect of the Persian empire. It was several times the size of any previous empire. The Greek empire, on the other hand, was no larger than the Persian, and was probably in fact slightly smaller. Moreover, the Persians maintained their vast empire for over two hundred years, whereas the Greek empire was broken up and reduced in size only nine years after its foundation. Note, however, that both the third kingdom and the fourth kingdom are said to rule over or tread down 'the whole earth' (2: 39; 7: 23), and we are given the impression that the fourth kingdom crushes the first three kingdoms (2: 40; 7: 7, 23). We have already noted that Rome was defeated by the Parthians, and that Babylonia, Media and Persia all remained outside the Roman empire. Greece, on the other hand, rapidly crushed and took over the entire Persian empire (apart from some border areas), including Babylonia, Media and Persia. Thus the third and fourth kingdoms both rule over 'the whole earth', and regarding this, we note that Greece ruled over almost the same vast area (both in size and location) as Persia. Note also that the third kingdom rules over the whole earth, but the fourth kingdom *devours* it, and tramples it down and breaks it to pieces. The Persians ruled over their great empire for over two hundred years. Alexander smashed it rapidly and thoroughly, but he died soon afterwards, before he was able to organize it into as closely cohesive a system as that of the Persians. His successors were unable to maintain it, and it split up into a number of separate kingdoms and was reduced in size. This is all vividly portrayed in Daniel's fourth kingdom, but I am not dealing with that kingdom here in any detail.

I shall, however, summarize very briefly the ways in which Greece fulfilled the visions of the fourth kingdom and Rome did not—leaving out of consideration the idea that the Roman empire (in its 'feet of iron and clay' stage) is still in existence or is to be revived at the end of the present age. (1) The Greek armies of Alexander were invincible, whereas the Roman armies were not (2: 40; 7: 7, 19). (2) The Greek empire was divided in a very clear-cut way into an initial period of invincible strength and a second period of division and weakness, whereas Rome was not (2: 41, 42). (3) Daniel 2: 43 was fulfilled very exactly by the Greek attempt to fuse East and West through intermingling and intermarriage, whereas Rome provided no such fulfilment. (4) The western nation of Greece was very 'different' from the oriental nations of Babylon, Media and Persia, whereas Rome was in many respects very similar to Greece (7: 23). (5) In the context of the book of Daniel, Greece can be said to have 'devoured the whole earth' and to have crushed the first three kingdoms, whereas this cannot be said of Rome (2: 40; 7: 23). (6) The horns of

the fourth beast found a very precise fulfilment in the kings of the Syrian part of the Greek empire from Seleucus Nicator to Antiochus Epiphanes (nearly all of whom are described in chapter 11), whereas Rome provided no such fulfilment. (7) The Greek empire was destroyed before Christ was glorified, whereas Rome was not (2: 34, 35; 7: 11, 13, 14; *cf.* the verses quoted earlier which show that the stone became a mountain and the one like a son of man received the kingdom at the time of the first advent. Note that the Roman empire reached its greatest extent and was at *the*

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zenith of its power during the reign of Trajan, many years *after* the time of Christ. At this time Christianity had already spread to most parts of the empire and far beyond.)

These conclusions are reinforced when we take chapters 8, 11 and 12 and other matters into consideration. I think, however, that enough has been written here to show that the case for identifying Daniel's four kingdoms as Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece is very strong indeed.

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