

INTERPRETING THE VISIONS OF DANIEL 2 AND 7

Most conservative commentators recognize that the visions contained in chapters 2 and 7 of the book of Daniel present two sweeping panoramic overviews of the same history. In his commentary on Daniel, John F. Walvoord states: "What is true of the book in general is especially true of chapter 2. Nowhere else in Scripture, except in Daniel 7, is a more comprehensive picture given of world history as it stretched from the time of Daniel, 600 years before Christ, to the consummation at the second advent of Christ."¹ Commentators are not in agreement on the interpretation of Daniel 2 and 7. While it is difficult to deny that the panoramic of history begins with the Babylonian Empire, many would disagree with Walvoord's conclusion that the history stretches to the second advent. The purpose of this paper is to interpret the visions of Daniel 2 and 7 and demonstrate that, from different perspectives, they fundamentally reveal the same history. Moreover, the history revealed by Daniel is as yet unfinished and remains to be fulfilled when our Lord Jesus Christ returns.

In the initial telling of the dream by Daniel in chapter 2, he states the following to the king:

Daniel 2:31 Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness *was* excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof *was* terrible. 32 This image's head *was* of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, 33 His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. 34 Thou sawest till

¹ John F. Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 44.

that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet *that were* of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. 35 Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth.

Before addressing the interpretation of the vision, two observations should be made. The metals increase in strength from head to toe, but diminish in value. Insofar as these metals will represent different kingdoms, we may question what is meant by the changes in the metals. Arnold Fruchtenbaum concludes that it indicates “the decrease of the character of authority and rule.”² Hobert Freeman also comments on this along the same lines: “In fact, the composition of the image indicates a progressive deterioration in sovereignty. From the most precious metal, gold, each succeeding metal is less valuable: silver, brass, iron, and finally iron and clay.”³ Walvoord adds a further comment to this: “While the materials decrease in weight, they increase in hardness with the notable exception of the clay in the feet. The image is obviously top heavy and weak in its feet.”⁴ It is also apparent from Daniel 2:39-40 that the kingdoms are presented in chronological order of succession from head to toe. This progression sets the stage for the fifth kingdom, to be discussed below.

Whatever disputes there may be as to the interpretation of the overall vision, Daniel explicitly states the meaning of the head of the statue. Daniel states: “...Thou

² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps Of The Messiah* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2004), 22.

³ Hobert E. Freeman, *An Introduction To The Old Testament Prophets* (Warsaw, IN: Faith Ministries & Publications, 2004), 277.

⁴ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 63.

art this head of gold. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee...” (Daniel 2:38-39). King Nebuchadnezzar, the head of the Babylonian Empire, is the golden head of the statue. That it is his kingdom in view, and not simply him as an individual, is apparent from Daniel’s statement that he will be succeeded by an inferior kingdom. Walvoord’s comments on this point are helpful: “The identification of the head of gold with Nebuchadnezzar is a reference to the empire as personified in its ruler. As Young points out, critics have had a field day in attempting to explain this expression, but there is no solid reason for not taking it in its simplest sense, that is, that the reference is to the king as the symbol of the empire.”⁵ That the head is gold is fitting since, as Renald Showers points out, the chief God of Babylon was Marduk, the god of gold, and moreover, gold was used extensively in the construction of the buildings in the city of Babylon.⁶

The identification of the kingdom that succeeds Babylon is subject to substantial debate. While conservative scholar John Walvoord identifies the second kingdom as the alliance of Medes and Persians that defeated Babylon in 539 B.C., he concedes that chapter 2 alone gives insufficient data to identify the kingdoms completely: “The revelation of chapter 2 does not give sufficient detail to identify the kingdoms completely, but when this revelation is coupled with that of chapters 7-8, the identification becomes clear and unmistakable.”⁷ Probably the best reason to take the second kingdom—the breast and arms of silver—as the Medo-

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶ Renald E. Showers, *The Most High God* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1994), 116.

⁷ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 67.

Persian Empire is Daniel's confirmation in 5:28 that the Medes and Persians would defeat Babylon. That the statue represents various kingdoms in one figure suggests a continuity between the kingdoms, or a succession, which together with the historical record that the Medo-Persians succeeded the Babylonian Empire (as also recorded in Daniel 5), provides further support for this interpretation.

We can also draw support from the parallels between the visions in Daniel 7 and 8. Daniel 8 describes a ram with two horns, specifically identified as the Medo-Persians (Daniel 8:20), that is defeated by a swift goat with a notable horn between his eyes, a king. The goat is specifically identified (Daniel 8:21) as Greece, and with the death of the notable horn, four nations come out of the one (Daniel 8:22). The description of Greece parallels the vision Daniel saw in chapter 7, just two years earlier, of a winged leopard (suggesting speed) with four heads, which again suggests a single kingdom from which four lesser kingdoms will derive. From this parallel, we can infer that the winged leopard is Greece, and accordingly, the bear of Daniel 7 parallels the ram of Daniel 8, which is the Medo-Persian Empire. Once we observe that the five kingdoms of Daniel 2 parallel the five kingdoms of Daniel 7, then the bear (Medo-Persians) and leopard (Greece) of Daniel 7 help us identify the chest, belly and legs of the statue in Daniel 2. The crux of the matter is the fifth kingdom in both visions. Daniel 2 describes the fifth kingdom being established by God, having eternal duration, destroying the fourth kingdom of iron and clay, and filling the whole earth. Daniel 7 describes the destruction of the fourth beast by God himself, and a fifth kingdom given to the "Son of man" (Daniel 7:13) that is both global and eternal. It is inescapable that both visions describe the same fifth

kingdom, and therefore, the same fourth kingdom, a point further supported by the parallels in the descriptions (e.g., 10 toes of the statue, 10 horns of the fourth beast). That the fourth and fifth kingdoms of the two visions represent the same kingdoms supports the interpretation that the others kingdoms also match. For this reason, we can infer that the chest and arms must be the Medo-Persian Empire, and the belly and legs comprise Greece.

While the foregoing analysis is fairly well accepted among premillennialists, liberal scholars take a different view. Freeman summarizes their approach to this text:

The critical school, assigning a Maccabean date for Daniel and denying the possibility of predictive prophecy, places all four kingdoms prior to the alleged date of the book's composition (c. 167 B.C.) and thus identifies them as Babylonian, Median, Persian and Greco-Macedonian. According to this theory, the supposed second century B.C. Jewish author of the book, ignorant of the precise historical succession of kingdoms of the sixth century B.C., erroneously believed the Medes constituted a separate kingdom ("the breast and arms of silver") following the Babylonian. The Persians then supplanted the Medes, which were followed by the fourth and last kingdom of the Greeks. It was during this latter period that the book was composed; therefore, the Roman kingdom could not have been predicted.⁸

Robert Chisholm correctly criticizes this view as untenable based on the plain language of the text in Daniel:

For this reason, many identify the chest and arms of silver as the Medes, the bronze belly and thighs as the Persians, and the legs of iron as the Greek empire under Alexander the Great...

However, the proposed distinction between Media and Persia is problematic since Cyrus ruled over both, a fact recognized by the text's references to "the Medes and Persians" as a unified entity (see 5:28; 6:8, 12, 15). Proponents of the view respond by pointing out

⁸ Freeman, *An Introduction To The Old Testament Prophets*, 275.

that the reign (or perhaps “kingdom”) of Darius the Mede seems to be distinguished from that of Cyrus the Persian (6:28). However, there is no reason why their reigns cannot be concurrent, with Darius being a subordinate of Cyrus. According to 5:28, Belshazzar’s kingdom was given to the Medes and Persians, and 9:1 says that Darius was “made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom,” suggesting he was appointed by a higher authority. Furthermore, in chapter 8 a two-horned ram symbolizes Media and Persia (see v. 20), reflecting the unity between these groups as well as their ethnic diversity.⁹

As Walvoord confirms, the critical view is not textually driven so much as it is by a commitment to minimizing the prophetic element:

The attempt to divide the second and third kingdom as if the second kingdom is that of the Medes and the third kingdom that of the Persians followed by the fourth empire identified as Greece... is obviously motivated by the desire to reduce the prophetic element to a minimum. Even a spurious Daniel living in the second century, according to these critics, could not have predicted accurately a future Roman Empire, but he could have reported on the Babylonian, Median, and Grecian empires.¹⁰

The identification of the fourth kingdom is also debated. The proper identification is very important because it determines how far out chronologically the prophecy reaches, and because the emphasis in both visions focuses especially on the fourth kingdom. In both visions, the imagery representing the fourth kingdom suggests stages of development. Arnold Fruchtenbaum identifies three stages of the fourth kingdom in Daniel 2:

... This Fourth Empire goes through several stages, three of which are presented in this text. First there is the United Stage (v. 40). But this United Stage gives way to the Two Division Stage (v. 41) which still has the strength of iron. Eventually, however, the Fourth Gentile Empire gives way to a Ten Division Stage, as is seen in the ten toes (vv. 42-43) being composed of iron and clay. Part of this Ten Division

⁹ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook On The Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 297-98.

¹⁰ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 66.

Stage will be strong and part will be brittle and weak. The lack of cohesiveness is especially evident in the toes. Unity is impossible and the ten divisions take place because the different elements will not coalesce...¹¹

In Daniel 7, we find additional stages to the fourth kingdom. That the fourth beast devours the whole earth suggests a united stage, borrowing from Fruchtenbaum's terminology. What is added in Daniel 7 is what Fruchtenbaum refers to as the Antichrist Stage with its additional revelation about an eleventh horn (or king) that defeats three of the ten horns. If the earlier identification of the third kingdom as Greece was correct, then this fourth kingdom must be the Roman Empire, at least in its early stages. The division of the kingdom would fit the historical division of the Roman Empire in A.D. 364 into eastern and western divisions.¹² But the ten horns does not find historical fulfillment yet. Outlining the history of the two divisions of the Roman Empire following A.D. 364, Fruchtenbaum concludes, "in 364 the Two Division Stage began and continues to the present day. The centers of the balance of power may shift again, but it will remain essentially an east-west balance until it gives way to the third stage."¹³ Some insist that the ten kings are also historical at this point, but this is to spiritualize away the fourth kingdom's destruction by God and institution of a perpetual, global fifth kingdom. Accordingly, the better supported view is that the fourth kingdom is not yet destroyed and, moreover, will at some future point consist of ten kings (the toes or the horns), followed by a

¹¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps Of The Messiah*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹³ *Ibid.*

power play in which an eleventh king becomes prominent (cf. Revelation 13 and 17).

Even within the conservative camp, the nature of the fifth kingdom is debated, and perhaps this is the most important issue in Daniel 2 and 7. Walvoord comments on the importance of this issue, and how it has been divisive:

The crux of the interpretation of the entire symbolic vision is found in the prediction of a kingdom which the God of heaven will set up. According to verse 44, this is a kingdom which will never be destroyed, will never be left to other people, shall destroy and break in pieces the preceding kingdom, and will stand forever. There is general agreement among all classes of expositors that the kingdom which shall not be destroyed is indeed the kingdom of God. Having agreed on this important point, however, expositors are widely divided concerning the nature of the kingdom, the nature of the destruction of the preceding empires, and the time element which is provided.¹⁴

Broadly speaking, there are two views. The premillennial view looks to a future literal kingdom, instituted at the second advent, that will destroy the fourth kingdom, while the amillennial view views the fifth kingdom as having been instituted at the first advent and as having slowly brought the fourth kingdom to an end. The latter view is problematic for several reasons. Historically, it was not Christianity that brought the Roman Empire to an end. Moreover, the decay of the Roman Empire took well over a thousand years, which hardly seems to fit the description of a stone cut without hands immediately destroying the statue. Further, with almost 2000 years having passed since Christ's ascension, it seems that Christianity is nowhere close to conquering the entire world and becoming a

¹⁴ Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key To Prophetic Revelation*, 74.

global kingdom of any sort. Finally, given that the first four kingdoms were literal kingdoms, it is inconsistent not to also take the fifth kingdom literally as well.

We can further conclude that not only is the fifth kingdom a literal kingdom that will destroy the fourth kingdom, but further, that it is specifically the kingdom that Jesus Christ will establish. Daniel wrote: "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, *one* like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion *is* an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom *that* which shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13-14). This parallels the throne room scene in Revelation 5 where Jesus takes the scroll from the Father that conveys to him legal right to take possession of his inheritance. His taking possession unfolds in the chapters that follow, with the climax in Revelation 19:11-21. There, the battle is recorded where Jesus and his army defeat the beast, whose description in Revelation 13 parallels the descriptions of both the fourth beast in Daniel 7 and the description of the little horn as well. Thus, the Son of man in Revelation 7 is none other than Jesus Christ himself.

The visions in Daniel 2 and 7 are difficult and I think it best to avoid dogmatism on the proper interpretation of the verses. That said, the view that best fits the data in Daniel 2, 7, 8 and Revelation 13 and 17 is that the fourth kingdom's destruction will be future and literal at the hands of Jesus himself. The fourth kingdom began as the Roman Empire and, under whatever name, will be globally dominant again. The third kingdom was Greece, first under Alexander the Great and

then under his four generals and their successors, until the Roman Empire came into dominance. The second kingdom was the Medo-Persian Empire, and the first was the Babylonian Empire. The vision in Daniel 2 presents the Gentile powers in somewhat glorious fashion, consistent with it being Nebuchadnezzar's vision as interpreted by Daniel. The vision in Daniel 7 presents Daniel's vision directly from God, in which the same glorious kingdoms from Daniel 2 are presented as terrible beasts. What is inescapable is God's sovereignty over the nations and His unalterable plan to establish the global, eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ.