

DANIEL'S
PROPHECIES
OF COVENANT
CHANGE

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*Understanding Daniel's
Visions of the Future*

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PREFACE

LIKE MOST EVANGELICAL Christians of the late twentieth century, I was led to assume that the prophetic scenarios of the “end times” as laid out by authors such as Hal Lindsey, and more recently, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins in their *Left Behind* book series, were the best and only way of understanding those prophetic passages of the Bible that looked beyond the New Testament events. In studying the Bible myself, however, I struggled with many passages for which this approach seemed to be problematic. Furthermore, as someone concerned with defending the reliability of Scripture, I was not totally comfortable with their proposed answers to the cynics and skeptics who concluded that Jesus and Paul were false teachers because some of the things they predicted apparently didn’t ever happen.

Eventually I became acquainted with a different understanding of these prophetic passages of Scripture, which

took more seriously both the historical context of the New Testament writers and their original readers, and the use of Old Testament imagery by Jesus and the New Testament writers. This view, commonly called the “preterist” (meaning “in the past”) perspective, contends that most of these prophetic passages, properly understood, describe and were actually fulfilled in the events of the first century, which culminated in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. I believe the key to this understanding is found in the basic transition from the world of the Old Testament to the transformed world made possible by the Lord Jesus Christ.

New World, New Reality

The Bible consists of two parts, commonly called the Old Testament and the New Testament. These two testaments tell the story of the fundamental “covenant” relationship between God and humans as it developed and changed throughout history, with the Old Testament as the written record of the development of this “old covenant” relationship prior to the coming of Jesus, and the New Testament being the record of the establishment of a new and better “new covenant” relationship established by Jesus.

While there is a basic continuity between the old covenant and the new covenant, we also need to appreciate the radical differences between the covenants. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament focuses on this contrast, comparing the old and new covenants and showing how the new covenant is superior in every way.

We are far enough removed from Old Testament life that perhaps we don't readily appreciate the radical change

in thinking and lifestyle that the new covenant in Jesus involved. Consider first, how life in relation to God changed for Gentiles (non-Jews). The story of the book of Acts traces the gradual realization by the early disciples that the good news of forgiveness and new life through Jesus could apply to Gentiles as well as to Jews. What a change! Now Gentiles could be included in God's family through Jesus without becoming Jews—without circumcision being required for men, without making animal sacrifices at the temple, and without taking on all the obligations of the Law of Moses. No longer was there to be a wall of separation between clean and unclean things, between clean and unclean foods, and between Jew and Gentile.

For Jews, the changes would be even more momentous, though it did not initially seem so. Consider this: God invaded our world in the incarnation when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, yet for some thirty to thirty-five years, only a small number of people—Joseph, Mary, a few shepherds, some “wise men from the East,” and a few others—realized that anything of any significance had happened. Life went on as usual. Likewise, when Jesus died for our sins, only a small but growing group of disciples believed He was the Messiah and appreciated the importance of His death for them. For another thirty-five or so years, life for Jews who rejected Jesus went on as before, with a life centered on the calendar cycles of sabbaths and special pilgrimage festivals to the temple, obedience to the Law of Moses, trying to avoid any ritual uncleanness, and the need for the atoning animal sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, until the temple was destroyed in AD 70. After that, life for the Jews would never be the same. Since sacrifices were only allowed at the temple,

their only means of atonement was gone. Jews were now forced to either acknowledge Jesus as Messiah or redefine their religion without a temple (resulting in modern-day Judaism, which is centered on those parts of the Law and their traditions not involving the temple and sacrifices). For the followers of Jesus, the destruction of the temple was dramatic proof that Jesus's death on the cross had replaced the animal sacrifices at the temple, and was the previously unthinkable fulfillment of His prediction that the temple would be destroyed in that generation.

In this study of Daniel I try to show that the prophecies of Daniel are most understandable when seen “covenantally,” as pointing to the end of the old covenant era and the establishment of the new covenant in Jesus. This analysis of Daniel's prophecies also is consistent with, and supports, a preterist understanding of other prophetic passages that focus on this period of covenant change, such as the Mount of Olives Discourse (Matt. 24 and parallels in Mark and Luke) and most of the book of Revelation.

—Bill Saxton

INTRODUCTION

Structure of the Book of Daniel

BEFORE LOOKING AT the individual prophecies in the book of Daniel, it is important to appreciate the structure of the book as a whole. Three aspects of the overall structure are particularly noteworthy.

First, the book can be readily divided in half based on the subject matter. Chapters 1–6 have been described as “court narratives,” recounting some key events in the life of Daniel and his three Jewish friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—during their captivity in Babylon. Added to them in chapters 7–12, are Daniel’s accounts of the revelations he personally received (beyond the interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, which was given to Daniel as recorded in Dan. 2).

Additionally, Daniel can also be divided based on the language in which the original text was written. Daniel 1:1–2:3

was written in Hebrew, while Daniel 2:4–7:28 was written in Aramaic (the common language of that area of the world at that time). Then Daniel 8:1–12:13 was again written in Hebrew. These linguistic changes signal a significant difference in focus for these sections.

Thus, the middle section (Dan. 2–7) spotlights God's ultimate sovereignty over the kingdoms of the world and their rulers, with Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar personally being confronted with this truth. The cohesive nature of this section is additionally apparent in the chiasmic structure (ABCCBA) that frames chapters 2–7. In this analysis,

- A = chapters 2 and 7, which give panoramic views of the present and future kingdoms and of God's ultimate kingdom being established;
- B = chapters 3 and 6, which give parallel demonstrations of God's sovereign care for His people, in the accounts of the fiery furnace and the lions' den;
- C = chapters 4 and 5, which show God's judgment of arrogant rulers.

The passages of Daniel written in Hebrew (Dan. 1:1–2:4; 8:1–12:13), in contrast, focus specifically on God's covenant people and place (the temple, Jerusalem, and the Promised Land). Thus, we find that the visions received by Daniel in chapters 8–12 are previewing the fall and rise of kingdoms specifically in relation to the Jews, their land, and their temple in Jerusalem. As we will see, this covenantal focus helps significantly in understanding the details of all of the prophecies as being intended to speak to the change of covenants brought about in Christ Jesus.

Overview of the Prophecies in Daniel

In the book of Daniel, two dreams/visions are given to King Nebuchadnezzar and interpreted by Daniel. The dream of chapter 4 is a message specifically directed to Nebuchadnezzar personally, and is fulfilled in his lifetime. The dream of chapter 2, however, is given in response to King Nebuchadnezzar's pondering of the future and carries far beyond his lifetime.

The thesis of this work is that this latter dream-prophecy of chapter 2 and all of those prophecies of the future given to Daniel in chapters 7–12, are interconnected, revealing various aspects of the end of the old covenant era and the establishment of the new covenant and the kingdom of God in Jesus. Each prophecy ends at the time of the covenant change events: the establishment of the new covenant through the incarnation, life, atoning death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly enthronement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the formal end of the old covenant with the judgment on rebellious Israel and the destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70.

Together, these five prophecies (Dan. 2; 7; 8; 9; 10–12) provide a fivefold lens on the same sequence of events. As the revelations unfold, the future is increasingly revealed to Daniel in greater historical detail, with an increasing sharpness of focus on the transitional events involved in the change of covenants.

Thus, in the chapter 2 dream-vision given to Nebuchadnezzar of the four-part statue, the focus is on the kingdom of God, which would conquer other kingdoms and ultimately be established and endure forever. A main

theme of Jesus' teaching was of this kingdom of God, which was being established in Him.

In the parallel dream-vision of the four beasts in chapter 7, the heavenly court sits in judgment on the four kingdoms, the "son of man" is enthroned as King of all Kings, and the saints inherit the kingdom. Jesus' most common self-identification, of course, was as "Son of Man," with all this background behind it.

The prophecy recorded in chapter 8 begins with a ram and a goat, but ultimately focuses on "the time of the end." This time of the end, as will be shown, refers to the end of the old covenant era, comprised of the time from its beginning under Herod the Great to its culmination at the destruction of the Jewish temple.

The seventy "weeks" of Daniel 9 regarding Jerusalem, span the time frame from Daniel's day to the end of the old covenant, highlighting the Messiah's establishment of the new and better covenant, His destruction of the temple, and the ending of the old covenant animal sacrifices.

The last prophecy, in Daniel 10–12, provides a more detailed description of the events in the period from Daniel's time to the end of the old covenant age, culminating in the resurrection of the dead and their final judgment.

Chapter 2

DANIEL 2: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DREAM IN Daniel 2 is explained by Daniel as follows:

To you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind.

You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.

Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

This was the dream. Now we will tell the king its interpretation. 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 children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold. Another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these. And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay. And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no

human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.

(Dan. 2:29–45)

The Identities of the Four Kingdoms

The identities of the four kingdoms that comprise the statue in the dream interpreted by Daniel are clear.¹ Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom of Babylon (the head of gold) would eventually be conquered by the Medo-Persian Empire (the chest and arms of silver), which would in turn be conquered by Alexander the Great and the Greeks (the belly and thighs of bronze). The remnants of the Greek rule would in turn be swallowed up by the Roman Empire (the legs of iron and feet of iron and clay).

The statue's elements represent well these four successive kingdoms. Babylon was famous for its lavish use of gold. Its dominance preceded the development of silver coinage, which was used in paying the large mercenary army of their conquerors, the Medes and Persians. Then there is a distinctive historical association of bronze with the Greek world, and bronze was the preferred metal of the Greeks for military use. The armor of the Greek armies was bronze, and the famous Greek fighting ship, the trireme, had a bronze-plated prow and a large bronze battering ram extending beyond the prow. Finally, iron is appropriate to represent the Romans, as the Roman army was the first to extensively use iron on its warships, armor, and weaponry.²

Other associations between gold, silver, bronze, and iron are also noteworthy. First, they represent a declining monetary value per unit of weight. Symbolically, this may also suggest a decline in the absolute political power of the king, with Nebuchadnezzar having no challenge to his absolute authority over his kingdom, while Darius was restricted by his own need to submit to “the law of the Medes and the Persians” (Dan. 6:8–15). The Greek rulers represented a coalition of city-states, and the Greek “political tradition was more republican than its predecessor.”³ After them, the emperors of Rome had to deal with the Roman senate and the restrictions of Roman law, as well as the inherent weakness involved in giving their large Jewish minority a special status, with a great deal of independence in running their own affairs.

Conversely, however, these metals also have an increasing functional usefulness and strength. Also, they reflect an increasing availability. Natural resources of gold are seemingly less than those of silver, which are less plentiful than the copper and tin comprising bronze, which in turn are less than the abundance of natural iron ore. Finally, these factors may also suggest the successively greater geographical scope of the four kingdoms at the greatest geographical extent of their power.

So the four kingdoms are readily apparent. But an immediate question may spring to mind: Why these four kingdoms, and only these four? What about contemporaneous kingdoms in other parts of the world, or other kingdoms that came after these four in history? The answer: The focus on these four kingdoms, and only these four,

must be understood in regard to the Bible's focus on the covenant promises of God that were being worked out in the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These four kingdoms are the ruling powers that, beginning with King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, one after another, would control the Lord's covenant people and the place at the center of those promises—"the glorious land" of the Jews (Dan. 8:9; 11:16, 41), Jerusalem, and the Jewish temple. This helps in understanding, for example, the description of the third kingdom as one that "shall rule over all the earth" (2:39), whereby "all the earth" represents that area of the world relationally involved with God's covenant people. Similarly, the same Greek word used here (*oikoumene*) in the Septuagint Greek translation of Daniel commonly used in Jesus's day, is found in the New Testament to refer to the extent of the Roman Empire, in which God's people and place resided (cf. Luke 2:1; Acts 11:28).

Feet of Iron and Clay

The Roman Empire is further described as having legs of iron and "feet and toes, partly of potter's clay and partly of iron." Daniel explains that this represents "a divided kingdom," which "will be partly strong and partly brittle," and that "as you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay." How are we to understand this? Though the reference is ambiguous, one intriguing possibility is that the clay represents the Jewish people. At least two biblical passages suggest this connection: Isaiah 64:8 ("But now, O LORD, you are our

Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand”) and Jeremiah 18:6b (“O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel”). Two additional factors support this possibility. The Jews were a large minority spread out throughout much of the Roman Empire, with the Jews estimated to have constituted as much as one tenth of the total population.⁴ In addition, the Jews had a unique legal position within Roman society, whereby the Jews administered their own judicial affairs among themselves in regard to almost any matter except capital punishment, and were excused from supporting and participating in the common honorific worship of the Roman gods. The “marriage” of the Jews and Romans would not last, as the clay of Israel would not mix with the iron of Rome.

It is also noteworthy that the clay becomes partly “brittle” (Dan. 2:42), suggesting it is already hardened into a final form and no longer malleable by the Potter. As a reference to Israel this brings to mind the teachings of Jesus about the new unshrunk cloth that would not work to patch an old garment, and about the new wine that should not be put into old hardened wineskins (cf. Mark 2:21–22). The new covenant of Jesus would not be limited by the old cloth, the old, wineskins, of the old covenant. Likewise, the reference in Daniel 2:33–35 to the “brittle” clay—which would be broken to pieces and blown away by the wind, along with iron, bronze, silver, and gold—points to the formal end of obsolete old covenant Israel once the new covenant would be established (cf. Heb. 8:13).

The Establishment of the Kingdom of God

During the fourth (Roman) kingdom, a rock is “cut out by no human hand.” It strikes the statue on its feet and brings all the kingdoms to an end at the same time. The rock then grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth. Daniel explains to King Nebuchadnezzar that this rock/mountain symbolizes the kingdom that God will establish during the rule of the fourth (Roman) Empire and that will endure forever.

When we turn to the gospel accounts, we find this being fulfilled. Jesus begins His ministry with “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15) and makes the kingdom of God a dominant theme of His teaching. His kingdom was being established and would grow, like yeast spreading through the whole loaf and like the small mustard seed growing to be the largest of garden plants (Matt. 13:31–33). The rock “cut out by no human hand,” from which the kingdom of God grows, is Jesus.

The “mountain” imagery pointing to Jesus and His reign in the lives of His followers is also found in the prophecy of Isaiah 2:1–4:

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that

we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

The writer of Hebrews further identifies this rock/mountain when he states that Christians “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22). Not the literal earthly Mount Zion and Jerusalem, but the heavenly city of God.

But in what way did the kingdom of God crush these four kingdoms and sweep them away during the time of the Roman Empire? If we think of these kingdoms in physical, earthly terms we will miss the point. However, if we appreciate the spiritual forces behind these kingdoms we find our answer.

By His atoning death on the cross and resurrection, Jesus conquered sin and death, once and for all time. He ascended to the Father and is enthroned now. The kingdom of Jesus involves “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). He is seated “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (Eph. 1:20–21), with “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). By the power of His Spirit He is overcoming the spiritual forces behind all earthly kingdoms. The kingdom of God has been established and, though not yet fully experienced, is gradually conquering through the sacrificial preaching of the good news, resulting in the transformed lives of more

and more people surrendered to His kingship. The time for the peoples of the world to live in ignorance, dominated by other “gods,” is over. As Paul told the people of Athens in Acts 17:24–31, “the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” prior to their judgment by the Lord Jesus.

No longer are there such political entities as the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires. But also, and more importantly in this context, the spiritual forces that dominated them are also long gone, whether the gods of Babylon and Persia, the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods, or their leaders’ claims to divinity.

Also, there is that significant implication that the clay in this dream represents God’s Old Testament covenant people Israel. The clay was also crushed and swept away by the wind when the rock/mountain of the kingdom of God was established (vv. 35, 45)! Thus, the Jews would see the end of their unique covenant relationship with God when their temple would be destroyed in AD 70 (cf. Heb. 8:13; Matt. 21:43–45). In the establishment of the kingdom of God and God’s new covenant with humankind including both Jews and Gentiles, the old covenant between God and His people is swept away, along with the spiritual forces of “gods and goddesses” behind all of those four former empires.

Note that the dream stops with the establishment of the kingdom of God. That is all Nebuchadnezzar needed to know. The intent of this dream was fulfilled—to reveal to King Nebuchadnezzar the future establishment of the kingdom of God and to humble him before Daniel’s God, the “God of heaven” and King above all kings.

In Daniel 2, Daniel is a young man (604 BC). Daniel must now wait until he is an old man, some fifty years later, to receive the prophecies of Daniel 7; 8; 9; and 10–12 (553–536 BC), which would clarify and expand the revelations. These later prophecies would be given to Daniel for him alone to know and record, not to be spoken of by him at that time to others. They would become more fully understandable only with the coming of Christ and the unfolding of the events connected to establishing the new covenant.