

World History in Outline

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord's sermon outlines the prophetic significance of Daniel's visions in understanding world history and God's ultimate plan for humanity.

Scripture: Psalm 2:1, Daniel 2:20-46, Luke 21:24

Topics: "Biblical Prophecy", "World History"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the study of Daniel, emphasizing its crucial role in understanding the Biblical foreview of world history, particularly 'the times of the Gentiles' as mentioned by Christ. The prophetic program for nations, Israel, and the church reveals God's faithfulness, love, grace, sovereignty, power, and wisdom throughout history. Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream unveils the succession of four great world empires culminating in a kingdom from heaven, symbolizing divine judgment and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom.

Transcript

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The study of Daniel is an indispensable introduction to the Biblical foreview of world history. Through Daniel came the revelation of the major events which would mark the progress of what Christ referred to as "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). Christ defined this as the period during which "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles," i.e., from Nebuchadnezzar 606 b.c. until the second advent of Jesus Christ.

No system of philosophy or theology which attempts to arrive at the meaning of history can ignore this divine analysis of the progress of human events. The broad prophetic program for the nations when viewed alongside the prophetic program for Israel and the program of God in the present age for the church answers the major question of the divine purposes of God in history in which God reveals His glow.

In God's program for Israel, He has revealed His faithfulness, His love, and His righteousness. In His program for the church, the grace of God is supremely revealed. In the program of world history as a whole, God's dealings with the nations reveal His sovereignty, power, and wisdom. The nations may foolishly rage against God (Psalm 2:1), but God nevertheless shall triumphantly place His Son as King in Zion (Psalm 2:6).

Daniel The Prophet

Daniel the prophet was born in the ill-fated days just preceding the captivity. As a lad he was apparently separated from his parents and carried captive to far away Babylon. There, because of his unusual intelligence and promise, he was trained along with his companions for service in the court of the king. It was only after Daniel had successfully completed this course of training and had demonstrated his wisdom and understanding (Daniel 1:20) that he faced the supreme test recorded in Daniel 2.

Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had had a rapid rise to power, heading what is known in secular history as the Neo-Chaldean Empire. His father Nabopolassar had founded the empire in 625 b.c. His son Nebuchadnezzar had won an outstanding victory over Necho of Egypt at Carchemish in 605 b.c. and in the process of his conquest had conquered and later destroyed Jerusalem, carrying off many of the Jews as captives. According to Daniel 2:29, the king had pondered the practical question of "what should come to pass hereafter." What would be the end result of his great victories and magnificent kingdom? It was in such a state of mind that God gave to Nebuchadnezzar a prophetic dream.

Aware of the fact that the dream had tremendous significance, but unable to recall its details, he called in his wise men and demanded that they show him the dream and its interpretation. Brushing aside their protest that this was an unreasonable request, when they were unable to comply, the king commanded that all of the wise men should be slain (Daniel 2:13). Daniel and his companions, who had not been in the king's court, were included in the sweeping order.

When the matter was known to Daniel, he requested time of the king and promised that he would give the interpretation of the dream. Then with his three companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Daniel went to prayer to God who alone could reveal the secret. When the dream was made known to Daniel, he recognized the profound character of the divine revelation. His hymn of worship and praise is recorded in Daniel 2:20-23:

Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his: And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding: He revealeth the deep and secret things: he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him. I thank thee, and praise thee, O thou God of my fathers, who hast given me wisdom and might, and hast made known unto me now what we desired of thee: for thou hast now made known unto us the king's matter.

Daniel's Description Of The Dream

When brought before the king, Daniel made no claim for insight or wisdom of his own, but declared plainly:

The secret which the king hath demanded cannot the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers, shew unto the king; But there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, and maketh known to the king Nebuchadnezzar what shall be in the latter days (Daniel 2:27, 28).

Daniel then recited the details of Nebuchadnezzar's great dream (Daniel 2:31-35):

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. This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms

of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, his legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till 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. 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 threshingfloors; 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.

Four Great World Empires

Having declared the dream, Daniel then gave the interpretation. Four great world empires were to succeed each other, to be climaxed by a kingdom which comes from heaven. Nebuchadnezzar was identified as the head of gold, the supreme ruler of the civilized world of his day. Two other kingdoms are mentioned briefly by Daniel in Daniel 2:39, "And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth." These two kingdoms are represented in the body of the image.

Major attention, however, is directed to the fourth empire as being of supreme, prophetic importance, preceding as it does the final kingdom which comes from God. The fourth kingdom is represented by the legs and feet of the image:

And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay (Daniel 2:40-43).

The Fourth Empire

Although the first three kingdoms are clearly identified in Daniel in subsequent chapters, namely, Babylon, Medo-Persia (chapter 5), and Greece (8:21), the fourth kingdom is not named. There can be little doubt, however, that it refers to the Roman Empire, the greatest of all the world empires of history and one which had a larger effect upon subsequent posterity than any of the preceding empires. Even to modern times, there has never been an empire equal to that of the ancient Roman Empire.

The description given of it is typical of the Roman Empire. It is described as "strong as iron" (Daniel 2:40) and as an empire which breaks in pieces all that opposes it. This is, of course, precisely what the Roman armies did as they swept almost irresistibly into country after country, first of all conquering the western portion of the empire and then later the eastern portion. Although the division of the Roman Empire into western and eastern portions did not come until late in its history, it is anticipated in the fact that the image has two legs.

Major attention, however, is directed to the weakness in the feet and the toes described in verses 41-43. It is obvious that this is a matter of major importance. The feet and toes of the image are described as being part of pottery or clay and part of iron. This is interpreted as revealing in part its strength and at the same time its weakness in that the pottery was brittle and easily and quickly broken. Further, in verse 43 attention is called to the fact that iron and clay do not adhere one to the other and do not properly bond.

Whether this difference in material reflects differences in political ideology such as democracy versus absolute rule, differences in culture or race, or differences in economic situations, it is clear that the feet of the image are an area of weakness which leads to its complete downfall. In the light of the prophecy which follows, the feet stage of the image is best understood to refer to a form of the Roman Empire which is yet future, namely, the time just before "the God of heaven" shall "set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed" (2:44).

Many attempts have been made to find in the history of the Roman Empire a stage which corresponds to the toes of the image which may be presumed to be ten in number corresponding to the ten horns of the later vision in Daniel 7:7. It should be observed, first, that this situation demands a period in which the Roman Empire is divided into precisely ten kingdoms. There is no such period in the history of the Roman Empire. Although in its latter stages it was divided up into separate kingdoms, there never was a time when there were precisely ten such kingdoms, and no event followed such as is depicted in Daniel 2:44, 45. For the prophetic vision, therefore, to be completely fulfilled, there must be a future fulfillment.

The Fifth Kingdom From Heaven

The prophecy of the destruction of the image is embraced in Daniel 2: 44, 45:

And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.

It is clear that the stone cut out of the mountain without hands smites the image on the feet--that is, its last stage--with the result that the entire image is completely destroyed. The destruction cannot be properly compared to the advance of Christianity within the bounds of the ancient Roman Empire; that action was a gradual permeation which never assumed catastrophic character and never vitally changed the political aspect of the Roman Empire. History is clear that the Roman Empire was destroyed not by Christianity, but by its own inherent weaknesses and immorality.

What is demanded in fulfillment of this prophetic interpretation is a sudden catastrophic event which destroys all vestige of Gentile power and replaces it with the kingdom which God Himself establishes. The stone represents a divine agency rather than human, indicated in the fact that it is cut out without hands and is a proper representation of Jesus Christ as the crushing stone of judgment at His second advent. The Christian Gospel to the present hour has never had power to destroy Gentile government in the world and replace it with spiritual government, and there is no prospect that it will. Only divine intervention in the human scene and a display of the omnipotence of God could possibly break up the power of this world and convert it into the kingdom of heaven.

Prophecy Fulfilled In History

The prophetic foreview of world history afforded in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar was remarkably fulfilled except for the consummation. The kingdom of Babylon was indeed the first of the great world empires. Although not the most extensive or powerful in many respects, it was the most glorious. This is anticipated in the gold which represents the Babylonian Empire. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 b.c., it

rapidly deteriorated until on the fateful night described in Daniel 5 on October 13, 539 b.c., Babylon was conquered and the decline of the great city began. The rule of the Medes and the Persians, though less glorious than that of Babylon, was much longer in duration and continued for over two hundred years to 332 b.c. when Alexander the Great conquered Babylon without a battle.

After Alexander's death, the Seleucidae controlled Babylon from 312 to 171 b.c. and were succeeded by the Parthian Empire which successfully resisted Rome and controlled Babylon from 171 b.c. to a.d. 226. Babylon continued to be inhabited in some form or other as late as a.d. 1000. In control of the Holy Land, however, Alexander was succeeded by the Roman Empire. The deterioration in the value of the metals depicted in the image had the compensation of increase in strength, and Rome until the time of the Barbarian invasion was truly characterized by the strength of iron.

As is frequently the case in the Old Testament, the prophecy of Daniel takes no notice of the many years separating the first and second advent of Christ. It anticipates a future empire in the Mediterranean area which will correspond to the ancient Roman Empire and which, from the divine viewpoint, will be a continuation of it. This fourth empire will be succeeded by the kingdom of heaven, begun with a sudden judgment upon Gentile power.

The final world power described in Daniel 2:44, 45 is obviously different in character than the preceding four empires. It is subsequent to these four empires and cannot be brought in until their total destruction. It is a kingdom which is established by the God of heaven rather than by human agency. In contrast to the other empires which had their rise and fall, the kingdom which God establishes will never be destroyed. It shall break in pieces and consume all other powers and shall stand forever.

That the dream was interpreted properly and that the interpretation should be considered factual is brought out in Daniel 2:45 where it is stated: "The great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure." In the light of the literal and graphic fulfillment of prophecy relating to the first four kingdoms, except for the portion of the fourth which is yet future, it is natural to conclude that the fifth kingdom is also to be literally and factually fulfilled in God's future program.

The grandeur of this panorama of human history and the important place that it assigned the kingdom of Babylon as the first of the succession of world empires so impressed King Nebuchadnezzar that in spite of his high office and absolute rule it is recorded in Daniel 2:46, "Then the king Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face, and worshipped Daniel, and commanded that they should offer an oblation and sweet odours unto him." King Nebuchadnezzar also gave testimony that the God of Daniel is "a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldest reveal this secret." The elevation of Daniel to a prominent place in the government of the Babylonian Empire testifies to the profound impression made upon King Nebuchadnezzar. The experience of Nebuchadnezzar ultimately resulted in his turning to the God of Israel in faith (Daniel 4).

The revelation given in Daniel 2 of world history in its panoramic form constitutes the essential framework for all prophecy related to the nations. Subsequent details in Daniel and elsewhere in Scripture are amplification and added details and explanations. The Scriptures give special emphasis to the latter stage of the fourth empire and concerning this a great body of prophetic Scripture fills in the total picture.

The guidelines, however, for future fulfillment are found in the past. A study of Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece, as prophecies relating to them have been fulfilled, provides an important background for that

which is yet future. The geographic area of these kingdoms is involved in the final chapters of world history. Babylon has perpetuated itself religiously and to some extent is reproduced politically in the last stage of the fourth kingdom. A study of prophecy relating to these kingdoms as well as historic fulfillment is, then, the Biblical introduction to the nations in the end of the age.

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