

The Times of the Gentiles

Eschatology is difficult. Scripture isn't written as we would write an essay or an article explaining something. Yet, we need to know what God has in store for the future. He has a pre-written script that history's flow must follow, and the outlines of it are there in Scripture, but in a form that requires interpretation. One of the most important books for the study of eschatology is Daniel. The reason Daniel is key to understanding the future is, Israel has been thrown into the midst of the Gentile nations (Exile), so Daniel reveals what God will do to deliver His chosen people. What's revealed in Daniel informs us today how a faithful God plans to restore not only Israel but His entire Creation to beauty, peace, and righteousness. Let's look at "The Times of the Gentiles," a period that encompasses us today, and how it will end, and why. It's important to our worldview, to our understanding of how we're to be.

In these chapters, Daniel is fulfilling Israel's role of revealing spiritual truths, of being a light to the Gentiles, even though he's a captive in exile. The revelation here has to do with the future, beginning at the point of Daniel's time and extending into and beyond our time today.

The Gentile nations discussed here are empires that engage with and have dominion over Israel. The Far East, Africa, and all the Western Hemispheric nations seem not to be in this dream or vision.

There seems to be here a continuous flow of history, a succession and progression thru time until the end. No "gaps" are evident, although some expositors think there is. I'll discuss this below. The language that's used is universal (for example, Nebuchadnezzar has dominion over "mankind," he rules over all life wherever it lives), yet Babylon was limited in its geography, as were Persia, Greece, and the old Roman Empire; but the "little horn" (Anti-Christ) who emerges from the Beast, seems to have a much more expansive rule. Nebuchadnezzar's pervasive dominion can be understood as his values and worldview saturating all history even to the present.

The Statue in the Dream, Chapter 2; the basic data:

- The "head" is gold; Babylon, the Lion.
- The chest and arms is silver; Persia, the Bear.
- The abdomen and thighs is bronze; Greece, the Leopard.
- The legs are iron; the Beast [Rome]; but the Beast's feet and toes are iron [i.e., great strength] mixed with baked clay [great weakness].
- At the end of the Times of the Gentiles, a ROCK [Christ] strikes the feet and the whole system/structure crumbles, and God's eternal rule ensues.

Comments on this revelation, incorporating revelation in subsequent chapters:

- These are successive empires located in the Middle East, except the last one, which "fills the earth."
- The last one in time becomes or progresses into a divided kingdom (the feet). (Ryrie suggests the word "composite" rather than "divided.") Divided or composite means the feet are partly strong and partly weak. And its people are a mixture, un-united, having at the end 10 kings. But another king [Anti-Christ] arises at the very end, emerging from the Beast, that is, from the 4th empire, who defeats 3 of those 10 kings.
- The "spirit" of Babylon suffuses all these empires: rule, cruelty, military aggression, opposition to God and the saints, and that essence is fully epitomized in the person of the Anti-Christ. Babylon was at the head of the series, so its program of conquest, its dehumanizing values and its totalitarian, controlling spirit entered into and were amplified in their expression in the subsequent empires, Rome being the fullest in ferocity and extent. It's the very same spirit and vision that energized the people to build the Tower of Babel.
- Easily missed is the main characteristic of Babylon, which pervades and controls all subsequent empires. It is dramatically and vividly revealed in Chapter 4: pride. Nebuchadnezzar was fiercely proud, mirroring Satan's own chief characteristic. It's the pride that built that Tower of Babel. All empire-building is the outworking of pride (as well as greed, but that's for another day). Not even just pride, but *hubris*. Globalism is only the modern version of feudalism, an expression of elitist pride. Marxism, racism, colonialism and nationalism are all the result of pride. Patriotism is national pride. In contrast to this Gentile pride, the chief characteristic of the Kingdom of God is found in Jesus' beatitudes ("poor in spirit," "lowly," "meek," etc) and in the very character of Jesus ("humble, self-sacrificing, obedient servant of God. whose vision and ministry is to bless others.)

- There's progression in power and extent of dominion from Babylon, which is noble and glorious and limited geographically, to the Beast, which is raw, brutal power that ultimately extends into all the world.
- Anti-Christ blasphemes God, attacks "fortresses," appoints rulers over many people and distributes land (for bribes, financial support), will be attacked by the King of the North and by the King of the South; he will invade many countries, including Israel.
- Only Israel is in view as God's people (the "saints"), not the church. The time of the end will be tumultuous and threatening to Israel's existence ("a time of [surpassing] distress," also called Jacob's Trouble and the Great Tribulation). We need to read Scripture in the normal way we read any text and not allegorize something that doesn't conform to our made-up theology. The Church has been for too many centuries infected with amillennialism, which denies a future for a restored Israel. This chapter clearly shows that premillennialism is the correct understanding of the future. This is very important because to be an "overcomer" (Revelation 2 and 3) we need to live our present lives based on what we know to be a future reality.

Problems in interpretation:

(a) Is this current modern era really part of, or an extension or continuation of the old Roman Empire? Or, Is the Church Age occurring in a stopped clock? There's no indication of a time gap between the legs and the feet, just as there's no time gap from the head on down to the trunk and legs. There is a time gap in the vision of the 70 weeks in Chapter 9, between the 69th and 70th week. That doesn't necessarily mean there's a "gap" between the legs and the feet. So, does the statue explain all history throughout these past 2,000 years since Christ? I suggest it does, following Dwight Pentecost. (b) Is "fill the earth" to be understood literally, or only the region in proximity to Israel? All Gentile nations seem to be in view in the Great Commission and in Revelation. Moreover, when Christ returns, he will have dominion over all the earth, over all peoples everywhere -- instead of only over those Gentile empires. So the Danielic vision probably intends that the Beast eventually rules over the whole earth, not just the territory of the old Roman Empire.

Also, (c) should we be able to identify the 10 kings of the end? Are we near the end, or is the end still off in the distant future? Are China, India, America, Africa, South America, Pacific Islands, etc, anywhere in view in this vision? This problem will be solved as history unfolds in the near future. There is mystery in this vision because God is totally Other; although He reveals much to us, there is nevertheless vast distance between us and His ineffable majesty.

Rome never really ceased to exist. The city was over-run by hordes of pagan tribes in the 5th century, and there were no more emperors after 476 AD, but the Roman people and their culture continued on in Europe as individual violent, conquering and plundering nation-states, most of which persist to today. (The Eastern arm of the Empire persisted for centuries more.) So, does the Beast, the 4th empire, still exist today? Is our (Western) civilization really a continuation of Rome? I suggest it is. It's the source of false religions and the love of money, of power, of self and godless culture; it's the "world" and all that's in it. The statue in Chapter 2 is a unity, top to bottom, representing the entire time from when Israel went into Exile until her return, and we're in it today. We're at the feet.

The biblical context:

God had abandoned all the Gentile nations in rebellion against Him at the Tower of Babel, leaving them under the rule of wicked gods. They have no right to rule the world, and the rule they have is only evil continually. They do not and cannot govern righteously. Their religion is anti-theistic. The Times of the Gentiles thus is a time of evil on earth. The Gentile nations are the seed of the Serpent; some in Israel however are the seed of the woman. The end-time events revealed in the Book of Revelation are therefore necessarily global, and the "Babylon" in Revelation is a world-wide wicked religion and rule, represented by the 4th empire, the Beast of Daniel 2. In Revelation, Babylon is the spirit of Satan, the spirit of "the world," the spirit of Tower-building. It's an anti-God, replace-God spirit.

As God's judgment for idolatry and iniquity, Israel has been thrown into the "sea," that is, among the wicked, turbulent Gentile nations, to suffer and be purged of idolatry. Israel is right back where she was centuries earlier in Egypt under the rule of wicked Pharaoh. Only now the place of her exile is world-wide and Israel is, in this prophecy, under the rule of these proud Gentile nations. Daniel's lesson is, God is in total control, and His people must remain faithful to Him even though surrounded by pagans serving demons.

The ROCK is the future millennial (and beyond) kingdom. It is not the 1st Advent of Christ, nor is it the Church. The 1st (and 2nd) coming of Christ is in Daniel 9, not here. Only the obedient and righteous Son has the right to rule the world.

Satan is a usurper and uses the Gentile nations as his surrogate to rule, but he rules according to his wicked nature. An over-arching theme of all Scripture is the resolution of this question, Who has the right to rule?

Adam's commission was to subdue the earth, to have dominion. Because of sin, Adam's authority was severely mitigated, but it will be fulfilled by Christ in the future. The Gentile nations do not have authority to rule, subdue, have dominion as empires. They are usurpers. But God has given them this role for this interim period while Israel is in Exile. The ROCK (the Son) will subdue and have total, world-wide dominion.

Israel is now back in the Land necessarily to fulfill end-time prophecies. But spiritually, Israel is still in Exile and will remain there until Christ returns, and then the great gathering and return to the Land will take place. As Israel is still in the "sea," we are still in the Times of the Gentiles; there evidently is no stopped clock to account for this era of the Church. (The notion of a future, restored Roman Empire, while plausible, inadequately explains the biblical data.)

The Anti-Christ embodies the spirit of the Times of the Gentiles, seeking to rule the earth forever, in blatant and hateful opposition to the anticipated rightful rule of Christ. His dealings with Israel are deceitful but crafty: if he succeeds in wiping out all Jews, there's no one for Christ to return to, so no Return would be possible. He does not seek to annihilate the Church because the Church didn't exist when this revelation was given and won't exist on earth when Anti-Christ rules. As *anti-*, he isn't merely against Christ, but proudly seeks to replace Christ as the object of worship and world-wide sovereign dominion.

Adam's role was to rule over earth as God's lieutenant, but failed and was humbled (expulsion, exile, being ruled by others). Israel's role was to be priest-kings, but failed at that and was humbled (expulsion, exile, suffering rule by others, Gentiles). Jesus, the New or Second Adam, the ideal and obedient Israel, will fulfill those roles, but not until after His humbling (rejection, cross, as well as in the Body of the persecuted Church having to suffer rule by others, Gentiles).

My attempt at resolving the interpretive problems:

I assume that there's no "gap" at the ankle of the statue. In other words, I believe that Western Civilization -- wherever in the world it is found -- is the direct continuation of the Beast, the 4th great Gentile empire, bearing its culture, worldview, its anti-theistic religion and its values. Thus all these 1500 years since the supposed "fall" of Rome probably represents the feet of the statue. The very end of the Times of the Gentiles will see the nations of earth re-forming into 10 regions, the 10 toes.

America is part of the "sea." It is very likely that it's one of the 10 toes of the end-times. (The Anti-Christ could emerge from America.) America is certainly not a nation uniquely blessed and loved by God; only Israel is. In a sense, we in America are living in Babylon; Americans are Babylonians. Followers of Christ in America constitute a new nation (our citizenship is in heaven), a new and different people *within* Babylon, in the same way that Daniel and Ezekiel and the exiled Jews were in Babylon, among them but not *of* them; no compromises with them, no collusion with them, and no identities with them. The church's patriotic fervor is thus grievously wrong-headed. Our love of our nation, of America's prosperity, freedom, peace and comforts is idolatrous.

Who are the other 9 kings? All the nations of the world may soon be reconfigured into 10 regions (the 10 toes), each headed by a king or dictator. After WWI, an attempt was made to reconfigure the nations. After WWII, certain globalists formed the U.N. not to establish peace but to enable their internationalist vision. After another, future devastating war (which could end very quickly), I can imagine that globalists will reconfigure the regions of the world according to their self-exalting vision. It seems that those 10 kings would need to emerge prior to the Rapture, although that's not necessarily so. The reconfiguration could conceivably occur after the Rapture. Thus the Rapture of the Church really could be at any moment. After the Rapture, the Anti-Christ will emerge and then either war against or somehow defeat 3 of those kings within the 7 years of his Satanic rule.

Let's conclude. We need to keep in mind where we are in God's plan for the ages. Although eschatology is difficult, it's possible to rightly understand it if we study the biblical data and interpret it in view of all that's in the canon. God has great purposes for His creation and for His people, so let's commit to participating in the way that He's revealed for us. There's nothing more exalted that we can do in life. And let's be very careful that we exhibit the characteristics of the Kingdom into which we've been brought by grace, rather than those of the kingdom from which we've been delivered.