

Nebuchadnezzar's Image (Part Three): 'Belly And Thighs Of Bronze'

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Not much is written in Daniel 2 in explanation of the third world-ruling empire represented in Nebuchadnezzar's image. Other than its position on the image and its bronze appearance, the only interpretation of the "belly and thighs of bronze" (verse 32) within this chapter is found in verse 39: ". . . then another, a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth."

Such paucity of detail suggests the relative unimportance of this third empire in the march of prophetic events. Falling "between the Testaments," this kingdom played a lesser role in the history of God's people than Babylon or Persia, although it did indeed "rule over all the earth." From this one detail, as well as from its position between the "chest and arms of silver" (already identified as Medo-Persia) and the fourth kingdom of iron (generally accepted as Rome), we can safely name it as Greece.

Another factor that assists in its identification is the parts of the body by which it is represented. The belly, a single body part, represents a monolithic government, and the thighs, two body parts, represent a division of power. The Greek Empire, built upon the remains of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, began with a single leader. But after Alexander's death in 323 BC, his generals carved out kingdoms of their own. From the resultant wars among them, two major powers emerged: Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria.

Daniel 7 and 8

Daniel, in later prophecies, provides more details about Alexander and his successors. He paints a picture similar to chapter 2 in Daniel 7:6:

After this I looked, and there was another, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird. The beast also had four heads, and dominion was given to it."

The leopard, a predator, is the among the fastest of carnivores, and with the addition of four wings, becomes especially swift. This illustration describes the astounding pace of Alexander's conquest from Greece to Egypt to India. In twelve years (334-323 BC), he subjugated by conquest or voluntary submission the entirety of the Persian Empire and then some. This feat becomes especially astounding when it is known that this period included a seven-month siege of Tyre and three years subduing Bactria. Along with his military victories came Greek or Hellenistic culture and language, which later paved the way for the spreading of the Gospel throughout the world.

When Alexander suddenly died without an heir, his generals divided the empire into four primary kingdoms (the "four heads"). Ptolemy took Egypt and nearby lands. Seleucus received Syria, Asia Minor and the conquered eastern nations. Lysimachus ruled Thrace and surrounding territories, and lastly, Cassander controlled Macedonia and Greece.

Thrace was later absorbed by the Seleucid Empire, and Macedonia's power was checked by the rising power of Rome. Thus, both prophecies in Daniel 2 and 7 speak of the same divided empire, the former showing political and military dominance, as well as prophetic relevance to the Holy Land, and the latter the initial governmental situation after Alexander's death.

Daniel 8 also contains a prophecy of Greece, highlighting two major eras of the Greek Empire: its rise under Alexander and the career of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. A goat with an unusually impressive horn between its eyes—later identified as Greece and its first king, Alexander (verse 21)—flies powerfully out of the west and smashes against a ram with two horns, Persia (see "Chest and Arms of Silver," *Forerunner*, June 1994). The ram, with its two horns broken, cannot fight and is trampled by the goat.

The prophecy then accurately records that Alexander died at the height of his power. Some historians contend that his drunken debauch and subsequent pneumonia, which led to his death, came as a result of there being no more lands to conquer. Others opine that though he could conquer and rule the world, he could not rule himself. Notwithstanding, since he had named no clear successor, his generals ("four notable ones," verse 8; *cf.* 11:3-4), after years of intrigue and war, parceled the world among themselves.

Antiochus Epiphanes

Daniel's prophecy then describes the reign of one of the later Syrian kings, Antiochus IV, surnamed Epiphanes ("the manifest" or "the illustrious"). With tragic wit, the Jews named him Epimanes, or "the madman," when it became apparent that his policies were violently anti-Jewish. Determined to "civilize" (*i.e.*, Hellenize) the Jews, this little horn (Daniel 8:9-14) systematically forbade, under penalty of death, circumcision, Sabbath and holy day observance, and the reading or possession of the scrolls of the Torah. He executed some for refusing to eat swine's flesh, and butchered others who would not bow to a pagan image.

Additionally, he had a statue of Zeus Olympius (an "abomination of desolation," Daniel 11:31; *cf.* Matthew 24:15) erected in the Temple. Swine were sacrificed on God's altar, and pagan rites, orgies and festivals were performed in the Temple grounds. In his pride (Daniel 8:11), he decreed that he should be worshiped as Zeus; his coins were struck with the inscription *theos epiphanes* ("God manifest"), a horrible counterfeit of the true "God with us."

Other despicable deeds of Antiochus, like his wars against Egypt and the Maccabees, are prophesied in Daniel 11:21-35, where he is clearly depicted as a type of the end-time Beast. His historical activities blend into the future rise and fall of the coming world dictator, who will also speak blasphemies and persecute God's people (Revelation 13:5-7). *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (vol. 7, pp. 135-142) provides a complete and accurate explanation of these fifteen verses of Daniel 11.

Like the other empires portrayed through Nebuchadnezzar's image, elements of the Greek Empire appear in the Beast from the sea of Revelation 13:1-2: "Now the beast . . . was like a leopard." It is likely that this refers to the aforementioned speed and ferocity of conquest that Alexander's armies exhibited. Likewise, the King of the North, Daniel's name for the Beast, will react to the attack of the King of the South "like a whirlwind . . . ; and he shall enter the countries, overwhelm them, and pass through" (Daniel 11:40).

This third world-ruling empire sets the stage for the fourth and most terrible of the kingdoms portrayed in Nebuchadnezzar's image, the legs of iron and the feet of iron and clay. We will probe its traits in the next issue.