

Nebuchadnezzar's Image (Part One): 'Head Of Gold'

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The image seen by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in a dream has always held a certain fascination to students of Bible prophecy. Daniel's interpretation of the symbolism only heightens their curiosity to know the corresponding empires and the significance, if any, it has on the time of the end. It is time to rehearse our understanding of this key prophecy of Daniel 2:32-35:

This image's head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. You [Nebuchadnezzar] watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which 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 were crushed together, and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; the wind carried them away so that no trace of them was found. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.

Several important details surface immediately. First, it is an *image*. The second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6) describes God's revulsion of images of any kind used in worship. Although no one is seen worshiping this image, the idea that what this image represents is contrary to God is definitely present.

Second, the image's body parts are formed from *different materials* in descending value (Daniel 2:39). Gold is more valuable than silver, which is more valuable than bronze, etc. Finally, it ends in iron mixed with clay, an amalgam that is practically worthless and useless. However, the order of these materials increases in hardness with the exception of the iron-clay mixture (verses 40-43). This symbolizes two aspects of the same idea: While the spiritual, moral or cultural qualities of these empires decline, their military or political power increases as one empire overthrows another.

Third, the progression from head to toes conveys the movement of *time*. Though these empires overlap to a small degree as one rises and another falls, their dominance in world affairs is successive. This is clearly shown in Daniel's explanation: "But *after* you shall arise another kingdom . . . *then* another" (verse 39). Thus, we should expect to be able to follow this prophecy on a historical time line except where it continues into the future.

Fourth, the body parts themselves describe *traits* of the empires they symbolize. The head of the image shows a monolithic structure of government which determines the course of the body, just as in the symbolism of Christ being the Head of the body, the church (Colossians 1:18). The two arms and two legs indicate divisions of government or bases of power. Ten toes of inconsistent materials symbolize a weak-strong and possibly short confederation.

The Head of Gold

The Bible gives us the interpretation of the head of gold in Daniel 2:37-38:

You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory; and wherever the children of men dwell, or the beasts of the

field and the birds of the heaven, He has given them into your hand, and has made you ruler over them all—you are this head of gold.

Babylon had existed for centuries before this time, but only under Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC) had she reached her height. In a flurry of activity, he had conquered from Persia to Egypt, picking up the reins of power left unheld by the decline of Assyria. During this time he conquered Judah, taking its citizens into captivity to Babylon.

Not only did he rise quickly to world supremacy, but he also played a major role in beautifying and strengthening the city of Babylon. Covering 200 square miles, the city boasted 250 watchtowers and walls 87 feet thick. He laid out the city in rectangular blocks. Built of brick and faced with enameled tiles of blue, yellow and white, houses rose up to four stories and lined broad avenues, interspersed with parks and gardens. One 30-foot wide bridge over the Euphrates ran 660 feet. According to Diodorus Siculus, a 15-foot wide and 12-foot high tunnel under the river also connected its two banks. It was the largest and most magnificent city of the ancient world.

But Babylon was also a city of rank paganism. Within its walls stood 53 temples and 1,327 shrines to various deities. Dominating the skyline in every direction, Babylon's famous *ziggurat* rose in seven stages to 650 feet, crowned with a shrine. Some think this structure, taller than the Great Pyramid of Egypt, is the Tower of Babel.

The city streets were named after the gods of Babylon. Cults to dozens of different deities flourished. In all, the Babylonian priests worshiped 4,000 separate gods, each with a specialized function. In the ninth century BC, an official census of the gods tallied 65,000. Even taxation was done in the name of their gods. Also a center of astrology and the occult, Babylon was the seat and prime example of this world's religious confusion (Revelation 17:5).

Parallel in Daniel 7

In a parallel prophecy in Daniel 7, the prophet saw four beasts, the first of which represents Babylon:

The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings. I watched till its wings were plucked off; and it was lifted up from the earth and made to stand on two feet like a man, and a man's heart was given to it. (Daniel 7:4)

The symbolism of the beasts matches that of the image. The lion is the king of the beasts, but it is a vicious and formidable beast. With wings, it is also very swift. This imagery describes the early years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, marked by war, captivity of defeated nations and destruction.

Later in his career, however, with his enemies subjected, his aggression declined, and he spent more time in cultural and building pursuits. It was also during this latter period that he was humbled and admitted God's sovereignty (Daniel 4:28-37). Successive kings were also primarily interested in peaceful affairs until Babylon fell to Cyrus the Persian in 539 BC.

The lion imagery does not end with Babylon, however. When the apostle John "saw a beast rising up out of the sea," it possessed a "mouth like the mouth of a lion" (Revelation 13:1-2). Like the empires that followed, qualities of Babylon will be found in the end-time Beast power. All of the empires symbolized in this image spring from one common way of life that is thoroughly contrary to the way of God.

In future articles, we will look into the succeeding empires of Nebuchadnezzar's image.