

Nebuchadnezzar's Image (Part Two): Chest And Arms Of Silver

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In the succession of world-ruling empires envisaged by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the second to appear is represented by a "chest and arms of silver" (Daniel 2:32). As we saw last month, both the metal and the body parts help to describe the nation referred to. Without doubt, the chest and arms of silver represent the Medo-Persian Empire (c. 539-330 BC).

The only explanation of the chest and arms in Daniel 2 is found in verse 39: "But after you [Nebuchadnezzar] shall arise another kingdom inferior to yours." The idea of inferiority seems to pass to the succeeding empires as well. But in what way was Medo-Persia inferior?

Medo-Persia controlled a larger territory than did Babylon, so it was certainly not inferior in political or military might. Even before the fall of Babylon, Cyrus had defeated the wealthy Croesus, king of Lydia in Asia Minor (546 BC). After victories in central Iran and in Phoenicia, he conquered Babylon in 539 BC, and his son Cambyses overthrew Egypt and Libya in 525 BC. At its height the Persian Empire was nearly double the size of Babylon.

It did, however, have a problem with internal unity. Cyrus, a Persian, initiated the growth of the empire by usurping the Median throne with the help of the Median nobility. The empire, from this point on, was dominated by Persians, or as the Bible says, the "bear . . . was raised up on one side" (Daniel 7:5). The two arms of the image symbolize this division.

Also, each time an emperor died, severe struggles erupted over succession to the throne. Fortunately, mostly strong and capable rulers won these struggles, especially during its first century, and kept the empire whole for over two hundred years. Only the superior might of Alexander's Macedonian army spelled its downfall.

Another factor of its inferiority was, oddly, its rulers. Cyrus, regaled in the Bible as God's "shepherd" and "His anointed" (Isaiah 44:28—45:13), was not the same caliber of man as Nebuchadnezzar. Though he was a humane and conciliatory ruler for his time, he neither lived long enough to stamp his character on his realm (d. 529 BC), nor did he acknowledge God's sovereignty as did his predecessor (Daniel 4:28-37).

In relation to this, the word *inferior* itself (*'ara'*) means "earth, world, ground." Persia was literally more "earthly" or "worldly" than Babylon in God's eyes. The aims and drives of its kings were, as a whole, of a lower nature than Babylon's, though the latter's were certainly misguided as well. However, the trajectory of this factor in all these kingdoms is, according to the prophecy, downward, and it sinks further with each new empire.

On the other hand, it must be injected here that Cyrus was the instrument that God used to reestablish the Temple in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 36:22-23). The Persians had a general policy to honor the gods of all their defeated enemies by repairing or rebuilding temples and giving offerings to them. This was mainly done to appease the gods "just in case" they had been offended by the subjugation of

their peoples, as well as to smooth relations between the Persians and their vassals. Scholars are still divided over whether Cyrus actually meant that the God of Israel was indeed the true God and thus his sovereign Lord. Most think he did not because decrees to other nations have been found in which similar language is used.

Persian Government and Religion

Unlike the Babylonians, the Persian Empire centered squarely on its military and political bases rather than its religious, cultural or economic life. Historians consider the Persian imperial political structure and administrative forms to be the finest example of government before the Roman period. In fact, they think that the Romans borrowed Persian ideas in forming their own. This meant that the real basis of power in the empire was the army, even above that of the king, although the king supposedly controlled the army.

The religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, a dualistic belief in good and evil and man's struggle between them. Although it was less bloody, warlike, idolatrous and superstitious than other polytheistic religions of the region, it retained vestiges of ancient beliefs that eventually supplanted it. The cults of Mithra, the sun god, and Anaita, the goddess of fertility—similar to Nimrod/Tammuz and Semiramis, the old Babylonian Mystery Religion—grew in popularity until Zoroastrianism faded into obscurity. But its principle of dualism lived on in Gnosticism and the mystery religions of the Roman Empire. Some of these beliefs and practices (such as Mithra's birthday, December 25; Sunday as a holy day; All Soul's Day; and heaven, hell and purgatory) were later embraced by Catholicism to counter the popularity of these cults.

Other Prophecies

The Medo-Persian Empire also participates in two other prophecies in Daniel. In Daniel 7:5 the second of the four beasts in the prophet's vision is described:

And suddenly another beast, a second, like a bear. It was raised up on one side, and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: "Arise, devour much flesh!"

Among modern interpreters there is a consensus that the three ribs represent three nations subjugated by the Persians. They also represent the three kingdoms that posed the greatest threat to their power: Lydia, Babylon and Egypt (or some think, Media, Lydia and Babylon). The command to "devour much flesh" emphasizes Persia's superior military might over the peoples from Asia Minor and Egypt to India.

This thought is also contained in Daniel 8:3-4 in the vision of the Ram and the He-Goat:

Then I lifted my eyes and saw, and there, standing beside the river, was a ram which had two horns, and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. I saw the ram pushing westward, northward, and southward, so that no beast could withstand him; nor was there any that could deliver from his hand, but he did according to his will and became great.

History records that the Persians considered a ram with sharp, pointed horns to be their guardian spirit, and the king bore the head of a ram instead of a crown when he led his armies into battle. The

symbols of Medo-Persia used in the Bible, the ram and the bear, are powerful creatures, as opposed to the quick and agile goat and leopard, representing Greece. As for the different heights of the horns, the taller one represents the Persian half of the empire that rose to power later than the Median half.

Both the Medes and the Persians, as the Bible shows are represented by these horns (verse 20), also had territories located near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Though it makes little difference in the prophecy's interpretation, this river could also be "the River Ulai" (verse 2) upon whose banks the Persian capital of Susa (Shushan) was built.

The ram's pushing in every direction except east reflects the historical reality that Persia's eastern campaigns were inconsequential as compared to its other conquests. Though they did conquer as far east as the Indus River, subjugating Asia Minor, Babylon, Egypt and Armenia was much more significant. Persia felt very little resistance in the east, and in its later history the western Macedonians under Alexander, represented by the he-goat with a notable horn (verse 21), were its most challenging foes.

Indeed, as Daniel's prophecy continues, "There was no power in the ram to withstand him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled him; and there was no one that could deliver the ram from his hand" (verse 7). The entire Persian Empire collapsed in six years (336-330 BC) under the relentless onslaught of Alexander's troops, who never lost a battle against the larger Persian forces. It was certainly "cast down . . . and trampled" in remarkable fashion.

The symbolism of Medo-Persia is last seen in Revelation 13:2 where the beast that rises from the sea has "feet . . . like the feet of a bear." A bear's claws, which can slash and kill with a stroke, are its most formidable weapons. As was mentioned in the May article, this suggests that the end-time Beast power will exhibit some of the traits seen in this second world-ruling empire.

Next time, we will look into the next major empire, the "belly and thighs of bronze."