

The Fourth Empire - Rome

• Strong – power to crush

• Yet weak – Roman peace easily shattered

• A mixture of peoples

• The four kingdoms crushed and superseded by the Kingdom of God

The stone represents the kingdom of God

• Mountains speak of permanence and stability

• Old Testament visions of the future are panoramic – but the fulfilment is in stages

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream he saw a great image representing four kings and four kingdoms. The first is Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire^{□1}. Then there will come a second empire^{□2}, and then a third^{□3}, and then a fourth^{□4}. The second and the third empires are mentioned only briefly. The fourth empire receives more attention. Its main characteristic is its iron-like strength. It is as strong as iron. It breaks and smashes everything^{□5}. The Roman armies were famous for their power to crush opposition. Yet at the same time this empire has a weakness. *'And just as you saw the feet and the toes, part of them made with potter's clay and part of them made with iron, so this kingdom will be varied. There shall be something of the firmness of iron in it, just as you saw the iron mixed with the clay^{□6}'*. The Roman empire had firmness and strength in its government and its armies, but it also had the brittleness of a piece of pottery. The famous *pax Romana* – Roman peace – could be shattered very easily. *'And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so part of the kingdom will be strong and part will be broken^{□7}'*. The repetition serves as emphasis. *'As you saw iron mixed with potter's clay, so this people will mix with other people [literally: 'they will mix with the seed of men'], but they will not mix together, the one with the other, just as iron and clay do not mix^{□8}'*. This has been taken to refer to intermarriage but it could also refer to a very great mixture of peoples within the fourth empire.

In Nebuchadnezzar's dream-vision something new took place. The kingdom of God is represented by a stone which comes and crushes the kingdoms of men. *'And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will setup a kingdom that will never be destroyed, and the kingdom will not be left to other people. It will crush and bring to an end all these kingdoms^{□1}'*. 'Those kings' means all the kings of the four empires. These pagan kingdoms are seen as a whole. They go together to make one statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream-vision. Each kingdom incorporates what it picks up from the previous kingdom. Then (in Nebuchadnezzar's dream-vision) over and against the pagan kingdoms comes the kingdom of God. *'Just as you saw that from a mountain a stone was cut out without hands and crushed the iron, bronze, clay, silver and gold, so the great God has made known to the king what will happen after this time. The dream is sure and its interpretation is faithful^{□2}'*.

The stone represents the kingdom of God. Its coming from a mountain speaks of its permanence and stability. The 'everlasting hills' were famous for not being able to be moved. The kingdoms of men are full of human ideas and plans. The kingdom of God is supernatural ('cut out without hands') and full of God's ideas and plans. The kingdoms of men were and are temporary. The kingdom of God is everlasting. The kingdoms of men are each overcome by the kingdom that follows it. The kingdom of God is unconquerable and has no successor.

The question is often asked: does this represent the first coming of Christ or the second coming of Christ? But the question is based upon a misunderstanding. One must remember the principle that in prophecy visions of the future are generally 'panoramic'. That is, they include in **one** prophetic scenario **everything** that God is planning to do in salvation and in judgement. As the **one** vision comes to pass it takes place in stages. This is a commonplace in Old Testament

prophecies. I have mentioned it before in connection with Hosea, Joel and Amos.¹

□1 2:31-38

□2 2:39a

□3 2:39b

□4 2:40-44

□5 2:40

□6 2:41

□7 2:42

□8 2:43

□1 2:44

□2 2:45

When is the vision fulfilled?

• *Begins with the first coming of Christ*

• *Remains of other kingdoms continue for a while but are destined to disappear*

• *Relics of Babylon, Greece and Persia are still with us*

• *Fulfilment completed at the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ*

• *Eventual complete victory*

The King's response

• *Bows down in amazed admiration*

• *Daniel greatly honoured*

When is the vision fulfilled? It **begins** to be fulfilled at the time of the first coming of Jesus. It is quite explicitly 'in the days of those kings' that the kingdom of God comes. Each kingdom comes while the remains of the other kingdoms are still present. In the same way when the kingdom of God comes, **for a while** the remains of the other kingdoms are still present. But the other kingdoms cannot survive. As Daniel is watching, the supernatural stone crushes the iron, bronze, clay, silver and gold. The kingdoms of this world are destined to disappear under the crushing power of the kingdom of God. At present the kingdom of God is spreading as the gospel of Jesus fills the world. Its destiny is one of total victory. The kingdoms of this world will one day come to an end. God's kingdom will exterminate paganism. When is the vision fulfilled? It begins in the coming of Jesus. John the Baptist announced, 'The time has come; the kingdom of God is near'^{□1}. Jesus said, 'The kingdom of heaven is near'^{□2}. But the vision of Daniel 2 is not fully perfected. The kingdoms of paganism are still with us. Relics of the four empires are still around. It is not that the Roman empire will be 'revived' – an idea that is not found in the Bible. It is rather that the various international systems of rule and government are still with us (Babylonian interest in science, Persian postal system, Greek wisdom and athletics, Roman law). The empires are not **revived**; they are **continued**. All modern countries use the science, the technical language, the technology, the government-methods, that were designed in the days of the four pioneering empires. Daniel's vision began to be fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus; it will be brought to completion in the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. At a time when the Romans were ruling their large empire, Jesus came, and the kingdom of God was inaugurated by Jesus. Eventually the kingdom of God introduced by Jesus in the days of the Romans will be victorious over all earthly kingdoms.

After Daniel has given the interpretation of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar, the king bows down in amazed admiration of Daniel^{□1}. What other person does he know that could tell him what he had dreamed? It is not only the interpretation that he admires. Any trickster could invent an interpretation. Daniel has clearly spoken supernaturally, in telling the king what was in his dream. The king comes to know the reality of the God of Israel and the reality of his working in Daniel^{□2}. Daniel receives great honour^{□3} and at Daniel's request so do his three friends who had been his companions in prayer^{□4}.

Note

1. See Eaton, Hosea (Christian Focus, 1996), p. 52; Joel and Amos (Sovereign World, 1998), p. 140.

□1 see Mark 1:15
□2 see Matthew 4:17

□1 2:46

□2 2:47

□3 2:48

□4 2:49



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