

Brief Note

Is Prophecy Being Fulfilled Now?

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Introduction

We sometimes say that we can see prophecy being fulfilled all around us, but what do we mean when we say that? Is it just a figure of speech, or do we have specific prophecies in mind? If so, which ones are they?

Writings of the classic prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, generally have to do with the time then present, the near future, or perhaps they extend to the first coming of Christ. Prophecies that have to do with the second coming and those events that immediately precede it are by definition apocalyptic, and these occur for the most part in the books of Daniel and Revelation. In what follows I would like to give an overview of certain apocalyptic prophecies and show why we can accurately say that they really are being fulfilled now as we speak.

I have two reasons for taking this topic.¹ First, there is a yearly campaign to promote the distribution of *Liberty* magazine and today is the day for that emphasis. Second, within our church there is much current interest in reinterpreting certain prophecies so as to make some of them apply in the future. One reason for this, among others, is the need to maintain a sense that something remains for us, that it does not all apply to others who lived in earlier generations. It is not a point of emphasis here, but I submit that there is no need for such reinterpretations.

Daniel

In Daniel there are four major world empires. By following each other in history the relationship among them is generally one of displacement. For one to rise, another must fall. But there is more to learn about this as we study events that occur during the time of the end. Below I describe two types of relationships involving powers that are included in Daniel's series of world empires.

First type of relationship

Below I touch briefly on the prophecies of Dan 2, 7, 8, and 11. It is possible to learn much from Dan 2 by itself, or from Dan 2 and 7 together, but to understand the later chapters

¹ What follows is an expanded version of a sermon given by the author in Westminster, Maryland, on January 21, 2006.

well it is necessary to compare them with earlier ones. Since a major point in this presentation comes from the end of Dan 11 it will be useful to provide the needed background.

Chapter 2. In Dan 2 the first of four metals in the great image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream is gold. This part of the image is clearly identified. Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar, "You are that head of gold" (vs. 38). He continues:

"After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron – for iron breaks and smashes everything – and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others." (Dan 2:39-40)

For the silver empire to arise it was necessary for the gold empire to come to an end. In chap. 3 Nebuchadnezzar shows that he could not accept this and made his version of the image entirely of gold, but God was saying that in turn each empire would rise, rule, and then fall.

There is no implication that falling in this sense means ceasing to be. At the end of the sequence Daniel says, "This is the meaning of the vision of rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands – a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces" (Dan 2:45). All of the nations that had participated in the sequence of world empires would still exist when Christ should return, but in history they would displace each other as each successive nation came to power. As regards the fourness of the sequence, notice that the fourth empire is subdivided into iron and iron mixed with clay (vss. 40-43).

Chapter 7. In Dan 7 the symbols used are not metals any more, but beasts. The same principle applies, however. Each beast would rise by causing its predecessor to fall. In chap. 7, as in chap. 2, we are dealing with a sequence of powers. Again there is a distinction involving the terrible fourth beast and its little horn, which is little at first but grows into a great power in its own right.

Chapter 8. In Dan 8 there is no symbol that corresponds to Babylon, but the theme of displacement continues as the Medo-Persian ram is attacked and trampled by the Greek goat (see vss. 3-8).

We can say that the little horn of Dan 8 is a composite symbol, including the secular and religious phases of Rome, but the emphasis here is on the religious phase of that power. The terrible fourth beast of Dan 7 would have been out of place alongside the domesticated beasts used as symbols in chap. 8, but the little horn is the same entity in both chapters.

Perhaps one reason why Babylon does not appear in the chapter is to illustrate the principle of selective emphasis and thus make clear why the fourth beast is not present. It is only absent because of the relatively greater emphasis that God wishes to place on the second, or religious, phase of the power it represents, i.e., it is absent because there is something to be learned from its absence.

The little horn goes forth from a point of the compass in Dan 8; it does not come up out of anything, and certainly not out of the Greek goat. We see it appear in the prophecy as we would see headlights appear in the distance when driving at night. A vehicle supports them, and no one doubts this, but we see only headlights. In the same way, in chap. 8 we may safely assume the horn is firmly attached to a beast, but we see only the horn.

Chapter 11. The narrative of Dan 11 begins with vs. 2. Babylon is not mentioned in this chapter and Persia gets only one verse (vs. 2). Verses 3-15 have to do with Greece. There is an interesting summary in vss. 14-16, where the king of the North is shown in relation (a) to God's people in vs. 14, (b) to the king of the South in vs. 15, and (c) to a rival king of the North in vs. 16. The rival king in this case is Rome, which displaces him.

We are all familiar with the story of Antiochus IV Epiphanes being confronted by a Roman legate, who draws a circle around him in the sand and demands that before he leaves the circle he should make clear whether he would rather withdraw from Egypt or prepare to fight Rome. Realizing that Romans did not jest, he withdrew. The same legate then hurried to Cyprus and dismissed Antiochus' army there as well. Rome would not coexist with Greece, or with any other nation, as a world power. For Rome to rise meant for all others to fall.

Second type of relationship

In order to understand Dan 11 meaningfully we must understand it in parallel with earlier prophecies from the same book. Having said this, Daniel's final prophecy will add further detail to that framework. Otherwise, there would be no reason to give it. In chap. 2 the focus was on the head of gold at the beginning of the series. By now the angel's attention has shifted forward. And when we come to the book of Revelation in the New Testament the focus on the end of the series of world empires will be even greater.

The four empires. Within Dan 11 the last the four world empires rises to power in vs. 16, just one third of the way through the chapter. When religious Rome arises out of secular Rome that will again illustrate the principle of displacement, but that is treated as an internal matter within one world power and not as a transition between two different world powers. My point here, however, is that the displacing of empires is all done by the time we get to vs. 16, and yet the motif of North/South conflict does not end there. It continues on through the chapter.

In vss. 16-22 the term "king of the South" is not used in the Hebrew (it occurs in vs. 17 in NIV, but this is an interpretive addition). In vss. 23-28 the kings of the North and South represent different factions within Rome, with Mark Anthony ruling from Egypt and Octavian ruling from Rome. The topic there is how the Roman Empire came into being. In vss. 29-35 the kings of the North and South represent different aspects of the struggle that would result in the rise of religious Rome. So there the question is how the papacy came into being as a geopolitical force. In vss. 36-39 there is no mention of a king of the South. During the middle ages the papacy's power was consolidated and it ruled with absolute supremacy.

The time of the end. When we come to vs. 40, which marks the beginning of the time of the end, the king of the North is once more vulnerable to Southern attack. This situation stands in dramatic contrast to the papacy's situation during the 1260 years previous.

There is a question what the king of the South represents in vs. 40. There is much we don't know, but one thing we do know with complete certainty is that, whatever the king of the South is, it opposes the king of the North. Another thing we can know is that the king of the North in vs. 40 represents a religious power – the papacy. So what opposes the papacy at the beginning of the time of the end? Whatever does that is represented by the king of the South.

In 1776 there was a silent but significant challenge to the papacy from the British colonies in America as they asserted their independence from England and established a new

government based on the two principles of civil and religious freedom. These twin freedoms were the exact and diametric opposite of everything the papacy stood for. There was no confrontation, but the fact that such freedoms existed meant that someone was outside papal control, and this fact in and of itself was a challenge.

In 1798 there was a direct military challenge to the papacy from Napoleon, when the French general Berthier removed Pius VI from Rome and carried him into exile. In the years following there would be a scientific challenge from the French Enlightenment and from other quarters, as academic secularism evolved into evolution through the work of Charles Darwin and others. Darwin's book, *The Origin of Species* (or more correctly, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*), was first published in 1859. At the beginning of the twentieth century there would be another direct challenge from the Russian Revolution and the spread of world communism.

When the king of the North responds to the Southern challenge in vs. 40, it takes him three verses to get to Egypt. His recovery is reported incrementally. It is a slow, gradual process. This is an important fact about the passage and one with later parallels in Revelation.

When the king finally does reach Egypt – in the language of the passage² – he does not mount a frontal attack but merely expropriates the wealth that he sees there. "He will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver and all the riches of Egypt, with the Libyans and Nubians in submission" (vs. 43). The word translated "in submission" in NIV is *b^omiṣadāyw*, lit. "at his steps," i.e., at his heels. The idea is that the Libyans and Nubians (Egypt's nearest neighbors) would follow him and, of course, the Egyptians that he has just conquered follow him as well. The king conquers Egypt and everything surrounding Egypt. It is a complete and total conquest – or so he believes in vs. 43.

It is at vs. 44 that we come to the point of greatest interest. In vs. 44 the king's mood changes. He hears reports from the east and the north that at first frighten and then enrage him. These are not two sets of reports. To get into Egypt by land one must follow the coast. Only a narrow strip of land connects Asia to Africa and as one follows it into the area of the Nile delta he is no longer going directly south, but south and west. Just so. The reports that the king hears come from the east and north. They come from territory he has already conquered. He now retraces his steps – with Libyans and Nubians, Egyptians, and everyone else following. The whole world is his and he leads this entire body of forces against God's people, here symbolically located in Jerusalem.

Not only the king's mood changes in vs. 44. His direction also changes, and in this reversal his role changes as well. He leads the attack on God's people, not as a king of the North any longer, but as a king of the South. He is now in open rebellion against God and leads the entire world in opposition to those who insist on obeying God rather than man.

² I should point out that the passage is stated in terms borrowed from the past – probably even the past as seen from Daniel's perspective. This part of the chapter is reminiscent in some ways of Nebuchadnezzar's first campaign, as reported in chap. 1. If so, the book ends, as it begins, with a great Northern power attacking Jerusalem as part of a larger campaign against Egypt. So the language of the passage must be carefully distinguished from its application. God's people before the captivity are located in Jerusalem. This is the language of the passage. Today they are not confined to Jerusalem or any other place. They have been scattered everywhere (see Acts 1:4-8). So an attack against God's people today would have to be global in scope.

There is one other thing about this passage that cries out to be noticed. The king of South (the one we were reading about in vs. 40) has also undergone a reversal. Instead of opposing the king of the North, the two are now allies. This is a transformation fully as remarkable as the one the section's original king of the North goes through.

Summarizing, it takes time for the king of the North to mount a counter-attack against the king of the South. When he finally does this, the passage speaks more of expropriation than of conflict. When the invasion is complete, the king of the South becomes an ally of the king of the North and when they march out of Egypt together in vs. 44 they are shoulder to shoulder.

How to map all of this onto history? Well, it is not so hard as might first appear, primarily because this set of relationships is so unusual. When an event is unique in history, that reduces the difficulty of identifying it. We return to this point below, but here notice that in the present section we have an example of a major world power arising without displacing its predecessor. Instead, in the end, the two wholeheartedly support each other. There are parallels to this in the book of Revelation but nowhere else on this scale and in this period of history.

Revelation

In Rev 13 there two beasts – one from the sea and one from the earth. The beast from the sea corresponds to the king of the North at the end of Dan 11 and the beast from the earth corresponds to the king of the South in that same passage.

The beast from the sea

The beast from the sea is the power active during the middle ages – the one which suffers the mortal wound in Rev 13:3.

Actually more could be said about the mortal wound. Seventh-day Adventists have always applied this figure to the papacy in 1798, and this is correct, but something similar happened before. When the Roman Empire was reaching its end, it mounted a life or death struggle against the Christian church. Going down to defeat it suffered a mortal wound. Springing to life again as the papacy it recovered from that wound. The whole world wondered after the beast during the middle ages and asked, Who can make war against her?

In 1798 we have the sequel to what had already happened some 1260 years earlier to the Roman Empire. Once again Rome suffered a mortal wound. The parallel is not complete because what rose out of the ashes of the papacy included a revived papacy. The Roman Empire did not rise out of the ashes of the Roman Empire in the years following A.D. 538 (or perhaps it did), but the papacy did rise out of the ashes of the papacy in the years following 1798. Another power that arose at this time was the United States of America.

The beast from the earth

It took time for the United States to become what it is today. Its rise was gradual. The papacy's recovery from its mortal wound has been equally gradual. And as these two powers reach the fullness of their respective development and recovery they realize that they have much in common. Instead of competing for world domination, they make common cause and become inseparable allies.

Here is the context for Dan 11:44-45. At present we are still in vs. 43, where the papacy is accommodating itself fully to the world, appropriating its riches to itself. One way it has done this is to accept the teaching of evolution. Where popular opinion can be won by taking a firm stand, the papacy takes a stand. Abortion and birth control are examples. The world might not like being told these things, but there is respect for the form of the argument. Human life is so sacred, not even a stain of sperm can be sacrificed to the needs of society.

Where popular acceptance cannot be won that way, it is sought through other means, as for example by discarding the biblical teaching of God's creatorship – where defending a literal interpretation would only invite ridicule. The matter is not stated this way of course. God is simultaneously the Creator and not the Creator. Evolution is a continual act of creation, and so on. But at the end of the day the effect is all the same.

This is not a small or inconsequential point. The creatorship of God, as reported in Gen 1-2, is not only the reason for worship on the seventh day, as provided in the commandment, but the only reason why mankind should worship God at all. Throughout the Old Testament God commands His followers not to worship idols, because they did not create mankind, whereas He did. This is Scripture's quintessential basis for distinguishing between the one God and the many. Sweep this away and you have swept away everything at one stroke. The entire edifice of Scripture rests on this foundation.

The earth beast speaks as a dragon when and to the extent that it supports the sea beast's position on the creatorship of God. As what starts out as a casual pronouncement on an apparently scientific point becomes a point of emphasis, the papacy becomes the champion, not of God, but a world in rebellion against God. It assumes the role of a king of the South.

Discussion

Here is the fulcrum on which all religious liberty rests. From a biblical point of view, religious liberty is the freedom to obey God. When any power enacts legislation that makes obedience to God an act of disobedience to the state, or we could say, when obeying human laws means disobeying God, that state has set itself up in opposition to God.

The papal position has not changed since its early history. The consecration of Sunday as a holy day is a sign and seal of its authority to legislate in religious matters. If and when the United States should join the papacy in legislating against the law of God, and seeks to enforce such enactments by civil force, it assumes the role described first in Dan 11:40-45 as earth's last king of the South and later in Rev 13:11-18 as the beast from the earth.³

³ The term "beast," in a prophetic context such as this, has no derogatory implications. A "beast" simply represents a geopolitical power.

Conclusion

Prophecy is being fulfilled currently, but not in the dramatic sense of waking up some morning to read, see, or hear a defining headline in the news media. The process by which the papacy recovers from its mortal wound is gradual. The process by which the United States moves from being a champion of religious liberty to one which supports the papacy in legislating against the law of God – something we have not seen yet – is also gradual. We did not start speaking like a dragon in 1777 and, arguably, we have not started speaking like a dragon yet. But we are moving closer to doing so.

Anything we find in the media about the papacy achieving greater popularity in the world, including the non-Christian world, is a fulfillment of prophecy in this context. Anything we find about the United States assuming a greater concentration of power, whether militarily in an international arena or politically within its own borders, is a fulfillment of prophecy. Anything we read about laws that would require Sunday observance – as a matter of secular policy of course ("secular" because "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion")⁴ – is also a fulfillment of prophecy. All of these things are coming, but coming so incrementally, so gradually, so slowly that we might not be aware that anything significant is happening. But it is!

The slowness with which the above developments occur requires careful consideration because otherwise one could assume that one day follows another and that all the really important specifications of prophecy have already occurred. This also was predicted.

. . . you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (2 Pet 3:3-4)

Anything we hope to accomplish for Christ must be done now and it must be done quickly. The surest way to keep our religious freedoms as long as it will be possible to keep them is to use them. In saying this American Seventh-day Adventists are surely offering a time honored response to what see as a threat to the freedoms promised by this great country, because it calls upon them to do precisely what our founding fathers had in mind when they wrote the Constitution as they did. The framers did not provide such wonderful freedoms as we find there hoping that they would be ignored. So let us use them while we can!

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⁴ This is the first clause of the first amendment of the Bill of Rights. It is the fountainhead from which the legal interpretation of our Constitution flows. This is where it all begins. The entire text is available online at http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html.