

12. The Rise of the Second Empire

What intimation did Nebuchadnezzar receive in his vision of the great image that the Babylonian Empire would pass away?

"And after thee shall arise another kingdom." Daniel 2:39.

The change in the metallic structure of the image indicated not just another king, but the rise of a new power which would conquer and supersede the Babylonian world empire.

From whence were the conquerors of Babylon to come? Who were specifically named as leaders of the invading forces?

"For, lo, I will raise and cause to come up against Babylon an assembly of great nations from the north country: and they shall set themselves in array against her!" Jeremiah 50:9. (See also verses 3, 41-44)

"Behold I will stir up the Medes against them!" Isaiah 13:17. (See also Jeremiah 51: 11-14, 28.)

To the north of Babylonia there were a great number of tribes of Aryan stock, of which the Amidae or Madai (Medes) were the oldest and most important, stemming back to Madai, the son of Japheth. (Genesis 10:2; 1 Chronicles 1:5) Originally they occupied southern Russia, but around 2000 BC. they began to move southward into north-western Persia at about the same time that the Persians, a closely related people, began to descend from the north-east.

Probably as a result of Assyrian aggression, the Median tribes became united in the sixth century BC., and in 612 BC. Cyaxares the Mede, in alliance with the Babylonians, destroyed Nineveh, and brought to an end the Assyrian Empire.

It is a strange fact that though the Medes were the more powerful of the allied forces which overthrew Assyria, Cyaxares did not press southward to occupy the Assyrian domains. Whatever the reason be, he confined himself to occupying the Cimmerian and Scythian lands of the north, leaving Babylon to become the first world power of symbolic prophecy. Medo-Persia's time had not yet come.

By what prophet was the great king who founded the Medo-Persian Empire named?

By Isaiah. "Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have bidden, to subdue nations before him." Isaiah 45: 1. (See also verses 2-4 and Isaiah 44:28)

Cyaxares, king of Media and destroyer of Nineveh, was succeeded by Astyages, an indolent, voluptuous monarch who quickly lost his hold on the people and on the army. This provided an opportunity for Cyrus, son of Teispes, of the Persian line of Achaemenes, at this time a minor king of the province of Anshan, to foment a revolt and march on Ecbatana, the capital. After Cyrus had gained three victories, the army of Astyages went over to him and delivered up the capital and their king. Thus, in 549 BC. Cyrus, the obscure king of Anshan, became king of the Medes. Three years later, at the age of forty-three, he was recognized as king of Persia, and the Median kingdom became the kingdom of the Medes and Persians.

The Babylonians noted the rise of Cyrus in their annals, but clearly had no idea that he was to inaugurate a new epoch, in the history of the world. Only the prophet of God by inspiration had foretold his high destiny, which he now began to translate into history.

Having finally united the Medo-Persian kingdom, Cyrus marched and counter-marched west, north, and east to consolidate the territory overrun by Cyaxares, and in a few years he ruled from the River Halys in Asia Minor, where his boundary touched that of Lydia, to the mountains east of Elam, and from Ararat in the north to Southern Babylonia and the Persian Gulf in the south.

This left him with only two rivals, Croesus in Lydia and Nabonidus in Babylon. In 546 BC. Cyrus attacked and overthrew Croesus, and Lydia was added to the Medo-Persian Empire.

The next five or six years Cyrus spent in the east subduing Bactria and what is now known as Afghanistan. He then returned (539 BC.) to deal with the only remaining independent state, Babylon, with its tributary states of Syria and Egypt. How this fell has already been related.

How did Daniel designate the conquerors of Babylon?

"Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." Daniel 5:28. (See also Daniel 6:8, 12, 15)

Although Cyrus had united the Medes and Persians eight years before and was himself a Persian, precedence was still given to the Medes by reason of their being the older race. A century later, however, the order of the races is reversed, and we begin to read of Persia and Media in the book of Esther (1:3,14, 18,19). And in the Behistun inscription of Darius I. The latter king proudly claims on his great rock

monument in Western Persia, "I am Darius, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, of Aryan race."

The fact, however, that the book of Daniel uses the form, "Medes and Persians," is one more evidence of the early date of the book, and contradicts the assertions of the critics that it was written at a much later time.

How extensive did Cyrus declare his dominions to be? How did he recognize God's control over the nations?

"Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me." 2 Chronicles 36:23.

After the absorption of Asia Minor and Babylon, with which latter went Syria and Egypt, Cyrus was literally ruler of the civilized world.

Several ancient historians have corroborated the world-wide extent of the Medo-Persian conquests. Herodotus says: "Wherever Cyrus marched through the earth, it was impossible for the nations to escape him." Xenophon, another Greek historian and soldier, declares in his history of Cyrus that "he struck all with such dread and terror that none ventured to assail him. He subdued from his throne east, west, north, and south."

There is no real contradiction between Cyrus' praise in the Bible to the Hebrew God for his exaltation, and his praise of Merodach in the Babylonian tablets. Though he himself worshipped neither, but rather Ahura Mazda (wise lord), the supreme god of the Persians, it was part of his diplomacy in securing the loyalty of conquered peoples to acknowledge the gods of these nations as having received him into their favor. It would seem, however, that, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar, his later contacts with the Jews resulted in his recognizing Jehovah as "the Lord God" above all others. (Ezra 1: 2.)

By what part of the great image is the Medo-Persian kingdom represented?

"His breast and his arms of silver!" Daniel 2: 32.

The view has been advocated by some that the silver portion of the image corresponds only to the Median Empire and that the Persian kingdom represents a third one. This contention, however, will not bear investigation. Cyrus became ruler of the combined Medo-Persian kingdom in 546 BC., eight years before he conquered Babylon and overthrew the first empire of symbolic prophecy. The Bible assumes the dual empire to be one from the beginning. Daniel couples the Medes and Persians together in interpreting the handwriting on the wall (Daniel 5: 28), and the angel Gabriel, explaining a later vision, specifically refers to the "kings of Media and Persia!" Daniel 8:20. The separation of the two is a spurious attempt to foreshorten the scope of the image, and explain away its supernatural forecast of world history.

Was silver an appropriate symbol of the Medo-Persian Empire?

Indeed it was.

Silver was as appropriate a symbol for Medo-Persia as gold was for Babylon. It was, for one thing, the principal adornment of the Persian warriors. More significant still, silver was the standard of exchange in the days of this empire, just as, until recently, gold was in universal use for modern international commerce. Their word for money, in fact, was the same as the word for silver. Their principal coins were the silver Median shekel and a silver talent, which was equivalent to sixty thousand shekels. A gold coin, called a daric after Darius, was later used and was valued at twenty silver shekels.

Herodotus tells us that the annual taxes in the days of Darius Hystaspes were remitted to the treasury in silver talents, and lists the tribute from the various provinces in this form.

In what form did Artaxerxes make his special gift to Ezra for the rebuilding of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem?

"And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven; shall require of you, it be done speedily, unto an hundred talents of silver." Ezra 7:21, 22.

Here in the Scripture is a confirmation of the place which the metal silver occupied in the fiscal system of Medo-Persia.

How did Daniel say the second empire would compare with Babylon?

"After thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee." Daniel 2: 39.

Some commentators simply take this to mean "below" or "lower down" in the image as Daniel

sought to present the mental picture of it to the king. But it would hardly seem that this exhausts the implications of the word. There is a definite contrast between the two kingdoms, the second being "inferior" in some way to the first.

To Nebuchadnezzar silver was certainly an inferior metal, for had he not replaced the silver inlay of Merodach's cell with gold? Moreover, in the triumphal inscription of Sargon II, we find a number of precious substances listed in the order: gold, silver, precious stones, brass—which corresponds exactly with the order of the metals in the image, and indicates a declining scale of values which has persisted even to our own day.

In what then was Medo-Persia inferior to Babylon? Not in extent, certainly, for its area was actually three times as large as Babylonia had ever been. Nor could it be regarded as inferior in duration, for Medo-Persia retained its dominant position for 194 years, compared with only seventy or so years of Babylonian supremacy.

It was, however, inferior in luxury and magnificence. We have seen that Nebuchadnezzar chose to use his wealth for the adornment of his palaces and temples that they might strike the beholders with the awe of his majesty. The Medo-Persian kings, on the other hand, considered it best to retain their treasures in a more fluid form, that they might be available at short notice for the financing of great military expeditions. Thus the second empire was not so ostentatiously luxurious as the first, though its actual wealth was probably very much greater.

The Medo-Persian kings were inferior also in that they did not enjoy the same absolute authority as the kings of Babylon. While the first empire was an absolute autocracy, Medo-Persia was apportioned among a number of governors or satraps, who exercised supreme authority within their respective domains, and were not interfered with by the monarch of the empire provided they remitted their taxes regularly to the treasury. In the reign of Artaxerxes there were 127 such satraps. (Esther 1:1.)

The king, too, was subject to the laws of the kingdom. While he might decree new laws, when they were passed he was bound by them. The "law of the Medes and Persians" was supreme. Thus, when Darius was inveigled into signing a religious decree forbidding the petitioning of any god or man save himself for thirty days, he was unable to waive it even to save his trusted counselor, Daniel, from the den of lions. (Daniel 6:15) One can hardly imagine Nebuchadnezzar countenancing such a restriction of his sovereign will.

Was the second empire to prove any more permanent than the golden kingdom?

"Another third kingdom of brass shall bear rule over all the earth." Daniel 2:39.

Strong and powerful as was the second empire, the divine Word had foretold its passing. It endured a little longer, it extended itself a little farther, but in due time, as prophecy had declared, its course was run. The great Cyrus, who was killed in a battle against some northern barbarian tribe (529 BC.), was followed by his son Cambyses (529-522 BC.), Smerdis, an impostor (7 months, 522 BC.) and then Darius Hystaspes (521-485 BC.).

Under Darius Hystaspes the bounds of the empire were pushed to their farthest extent, and the record of his vast achievements survives till to-day in the great rock inscription at Behistun, near Harnadan in Persia.

The one mistake which Darius made, and it was a fatal one, was in stirring up the Greek hornets' nest by seeking to extend his empire into Europe. Darius was not only stopped by the Greeks at Marathon as he had been stopped nowhere else in his campaigns, but he generated a hatred of the Persians in the Greek hearts, never to be assuaged till the Asiatic empire was no more.

A century and a half, however, passed before the end came. Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I, and eight more kings successively bore sway over the Medo-Persian Empire, most of them bearing the names of Darius, Xerxes, or Artaxerxes. The last was Darius Codomannus. And in his reign came the successive military disasters of Granicus, Issus, and Arbela in which Medo-Persia collapsed before the armies of Alexander the Great, and this "third kingdom of brass" began its "rule over all the earth!" (331 BC.).