

15. The Iron Monarchy

By what was the third world empire of Greece to be succeeded?

"The fourth kingdom." Daniel 2:40.

The Oriental nations had been completely outclassed by the Western Greeks, and the successors of Alexander crushed out the last traces of resistance in the Middle East. There was, therefore, no likelihood of any new power arising in the East. The only possibility was the rise of some new power farther to the West, and it was from this quarter that the fourth empire made its appearance.

Just before he died, Alexander had planned an expedition westward to extend his conquests along the Mediterranean seaboard. If he had been able to carry out this plan he would have discovered a city some four centuries old, built upon seven hills on the banks of the Tiber in Italy, and populated by a fierce and warlike people. They had already reduced to subjection a number of the surrounding tribes and cities, and were steadily extending their conquests through the Italian peninsula.

Had Alexander been able to cross swords with them in his day the career of the Roman arms might have been forever checked. Rome might have become but a province of the Greek Empire, and the whole course of history might have been changed. But this was not to be. Alexander died before he could carry out his intentions, and after his death his generals were each so fully occupied in obtaining as large a share as possible of the empire for themselves, that they had neither time nor inclination to turn their thoughts to Italy. So Rome was able to develop unimpeded until it was in a position to match its strength against the world.

By the beginning of the second century BC., the Romans had overthrown the great rival power of Carthage on the North African coast and in two Macedonian wars had made themselves the dominating power in all the Greek peninsula except Macedonia itself, which was left as a bulwark against the barbarian tribes of the Balkans.

The failure of Philip V of Macedon to drive the Romans from Greek soil resulted in an invitation to Antiochus the Great, who ruled Asia Minor, Syria, and Babylonia, to attempt the task. But by 189 BC. Antiochus had not only been expelled from Greece, but had been decisively defeated at Magnesia in Asia Minor (190 BC.) and thrown back beyond the Taurus mountains into Syria. In consequence, all Antiochus' possessions in Asia Minor passed into the hands of the Romans, as well as the native kingdoms of Galatia and Cappadocia.

In the third Macedonian war (171-168 BC.) Macedonia was overrun, and, following the decisive battle of Pydna (168 BC.), both Macedonia and Greece were incorporated into the Roman provincial system.

During the next century Rome used the conflicts between the Seleucids of Syria and the Ptolemies of Egypt to break the power of Syria and turn Egypt into a Roman protectorate. Finally the charms of the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra involved Egypt in a struggle between the rival Roman triumvirs, Antony and Octavius. When, therefore, at the battle of Actium (31 BC.), Octavius completely routed the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra, he not only secured undisputed claim to Rome, but at the same time established his right to Egypt, the last independent fragment of the Greek Empire.

It is significant that, on returning to Rome, Octavius was welcomed with frenzied enthusiasm and granted the titles of "Augustus" and "Emperor," thus in actual fact inaugurating the Roman Empire.

A striking confirmation of Imperial Rome's place as the fourth world empire is to be found in the famous Canon of Ptolemy, the ancient astronomer and historian of the second century AD. His remarkable king list, associated with valuable astronomical data, commences with the era of Nabonassar in 747 BC., follows the Babylonian line to Nabonidus, father of Belshazzar, then takes up the Persian line as far as Darius III, the last independent king of that empire. It then lists the Greek kings from Alexander the Great, tracing the longest lived line after the division—that is the Ptolemies of Egypt—down to the beautiful Cleopatra. The next name is Augustus the Roman emperor. Ptolemy's Canon therefore, prepared without any reference to biblical prophecy, is thus a wonderful testimony to its delineation of the four successive world empires.

As the metals of the image merge from one to another in one continuous figure, so the Canon consists of one continuous list of twenty-four rulers of four successive empires, dovetailed into each other exactly where world power changed hands.

To what part of the image did the fourth monarchy correspond?

"Its legs of iron." Daniel 2:33.

The representation of Rome by the legs of the image is worthy of special note for the Roman army was essentially an infantry force. The legion of Republican days which carried the Roman conquests to the ends of the earth comprised 3,000 heavy infantry, 1,200 lighter armed foot soldiers, and only 300 horsemen. In the days of the Empire, Augustus used a legion of 6,000 foot soldiers with only 120 horsemen to serve as dispatch riders and the like. Practically the whole cavalry in his army were voluntarily recruited non-citizen auxiliary cohorts of 500 to 1,000 strong.

What metal was used to symbolize the Roman Empire?

"His legs of iron." Daniel 2:33

Curiously enough among the terms of peace forced upon the Romans by Porsena, king of the Etruscans, in one of their earliest wars for possession of Italy, was the requirement that no iron should be used except for agricultural purposes! What a condition to impose upon the power that was one day to become the "iron monarchy"!

Iron was indeed as characteristic of Rome as the other metals had been of the earlier empires, for the rise of the Roman arms was contemporaneous with the displacement of brazen implements and weapons in favor of iron ones.

"At the period of the Gallic war', says Dr. L. Schmidt in his History of Rome, "the ancient brass armor was exchanged by Camillus (381 BC.) for iron armor, a polished iron helmet being a better protection against the huge swords of the barbarians... Camillus is also said to have surrounded the shields of the soldiers with iron rims. ... At the same time the ancient weapon of the front lines was exchanged for a peculiar kind of spear (pilum) seven feet long, by which a blow might be warded off, and which might also be used as a weapon to attack the enemy." - Page 200.

How did Daniel interpret the significance of the "iron legs"?

"And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaks in pieces and subdues all things; and as iron that breaks all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise." Daniel 2:40.

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans were interested neither in art nor language. War was their sole employment. They traced their descent from Mars, the god of war, and the fierce she-wolf nurse of Romulus was a fit emblem of their national character.

"From the moment of her foundation," says Dr. L. Schmidt, "Rome had to maintain her existence by force of arms. Like a young giantess, she crushed, one after another, every one of her neighbors that came in contact with her, until toward the fifth century after her birth, she had subdued all the tribes of Italy, and acquired the sovereignty of the whole peninsula. What, in her youth, the giantess had been obliged to do in self-defense, and what had been a struggle for her own existence, became in the end her favorite pursuit. One war ever gave rise to fresh wars; she hastened from victory to victory, from conquest to conquest, till about the beginning of the Christian era she dictated her law to nearly the whole of the known world."-"History of Rome," page 1.

The phrase "break in pieces and bruise," seems not only to connote power of conquest but also rapacity, blood-thirstiness, and brutality; and these attributes were abundantly manifest in the Roman campaigns.

The full force of the iron monarchy was felt by the Jewish nation and the early Christian church. Christ suffered the extreme Roman penalty of crucifixion. Jerusalem was razed to the ground, its inhabitants almost annihilated, and the remnant scattered to the ends of the earth. Rome did its best to bruise and break the Christian church. Most of the apostles suffered martyrdom at its hands, as well as multitudes of the early believers. But the task was too great even for Rome. She might contend successfully against all temporal power, but when she set herself against spiritual forces she was impotent.

What new element introduces itself into the feet and toes of the great image?

"His feet part of iron and part of clay." Daniel 2:33.

The first three world empires of the great image are each symbolized by a single homogeneous metal, indicating that they would preserve their original form and character throughout their period of supremacy. The fourth empire is also at first represented by a single metal, iron, which continues down to the ankles of the image. But when we reach the feet a striking change takes place. The homogeneity of the iron is marred by the introduction of a new element.

How does Daniel explain this heterogeneity?

"The kingdom shall be divided." Daniel 2:41.

For three hundred years following the accession of the "Emperor" Octavius, the Roman Empire continued in unity and unrivalled strength, and then just as prophecy had declared "division" began to manifest itself. The emperor Diocletian in AD. 189, convinced that it was impossible for one man to control efficiently the vast system of imperial machinery, adopted the unprecedented course of distributing his supreme authority.

In the second year of his reign he appointed Maximian to associate with him as Augustus, and six years later he proclaimed Constantius and Galerius as Caesars subordinate to the two Augusti, but rising in turn to first rank, so as to supply an uninterrupted succession of emperors.

The empire was thus divided into four parts between the Augusti and the Caesars. The most honorable sections, the East and Italy, being under the control of the Augusti, and the more laborious sections, the Danube and the Rhine, being entrusted to the care of the Caesars. Diocletian himself took control of the East with his capital at Nicomedia, adopting the title "Dominus" to indicate his lordship over all.

It is remarkable that Gibbon, describing this period, unconsciously uses the very language of the prophet when he writes:

"Ostentation was the first principle of the new system instituted by Diocletian. The second was division. He divided the empire, the provinces, and every branch of the civil as well as the military administration. He multiplied the wheels of the machinery of government, and rendered its operations less rapid, but more secure ... Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," Vol. 1, 18, page 457.

The political division of the empire soon brought about the complete separation of Eastern and Western Rome. Thereafter while Eastern Rome held together as a unit for another thousand years as the Byzantine Empire, other divisive influences continued to work in Western Rome, ultimately effecting the fragmentation of the empire into the ten completely separated "toes" of the image.

Among these further divisive influences were: 1. Division in the army. Constantine introduced a distinction in the army between the court troops or Palatines, who were Romans, and the troops of the frontier, or Borderers, who were largely mercenaries interested only in the pay they received. As the former were stationed in the tranquil provinces and were progressively weakened by baths, theatres, and lack of training and discipline, the employment of barbarians to do the fighting for Rome became more and more universal.

Jerome recognized these indications as most surely pointing to the break-up of the empire. "For as in the beginning," he says, "nothing was stronger and harder than the Roman Empire, so in the end of things nothing is weaker; since both in civil wars and against foreign nations we need the help of barbarian tribes."

2. Division in the population of the empire. Not only did the armies of Rome become heterogeneous companies of foreign races, but thousands of aliens were settled in Roman territory to "appease" tribes which were menacing the border provinces. Thus the Burgundians were allowed to settle in the upper reaches of the Rhine, the Visigoths were permitted to occupy Aquitaine, and the Franks were given territory in France and Belgium in return for military aid against the Germans.

Sulpicus Severus, writing in AD. 401 on this prophecy of the second chapter of Daniel, refers to these alien pockets when he writes: "Finally, that the clay and iron, substances that never unite together, are mingled, denotes intermixtures of human race, mutually differing from each other.... We see that barbarian nations ... are mingled with our armies, cities, and provinces, and live among us; and yet do not adopt our customs."

Thus weakened by strife between rival rulers, rendered practically defenseless by the corruption of its military system. And harboring within its territories hordes of foreign races in constant ferment against their protectors, the empire became totally incapable of breasting the great barbarian advance once it got on the move, and incipient division culminated in actual dismemberment. Western Rome ceased any longer to be a unit, and in its place there grew up a number of independent barbarian kingdoms. History had reached the "toes" of the great image.

16. The Anarchy of Nations

While Daniel in his description of the lower limbs of the great image refers only to the "legs" and "feet," what further detail does he mention in his interpretation?

"And whereas thou saw the feet and toes, part of potter's clay, and part of iron." "The toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay." Daniel 2:41, 42.

The fact that Daniel, in his interpretation, mentions the "feet" and the "toes" separately, and that two whole verses are occupied with a description of the latter, is indicative of the fact that the toe-kingdoms were to have an existence distinct from the unified Roman Empire which had dominated the civilized world for more than half a millennium. At the same time, as the toes were composed of precisely the same material as the feet, there was to be no such sharp -line of demarcation as there was between the head and breast, the breast and belly, and the belly and legs. In other words the old empire was to merge into and live on in the separated toe-kingdoms.

This is precisely what happened when the old Roman Empire of the West was dissolved and the barbarian kingdoms arose in its place in the fifth century of the Christian era.

As mentioned in the previous study, the barbarians first entered the empire as refugees, seeking the protection of the Romans against the advancing waves of Huns in Central Europe. They became guests of the Romans, accepting territory and titles from their hosts, and came to regard themselves as part of the existing order. Even when succeeding waves of invaders brought to an end the crumbling empire of the West, the barbarians incorporated the Roman heritage into their developing civilization. While, therefore, the ruling power was changed, and the barbarian proportion of the population was greatly increased, the essential features of the Roman order and civilization continued almost in their entirety. In many cases, the uncultured barbarian kings appointed Roman officials to undertake the work of administration. These men naturally continued the Roman forms of government and perpetuated the Latin tongue.

Roman literature and learning were similarly preserved by the monastic establishments of the West, and as education was entirely in the hands of the monks and nuns, the barbarian society was gradually leavened with it.

The ecclesiastical system of Christian Rome, too, built up during the last days of the empire, survived its fall, and eventually gathered all the barbarian nations into its fold.

Thus Rome is not, as Childe Harolde suggests, "The lone mother of dead empires." She still lives in her children.

Did Daniel derive any special significance from the number of toes?

While in the prophecy of the great image no special attention is drawn to the number of toes, in the seventh chapter of Daniel, where the four empires appear again under the symbolism of four beasts, the fourth is mentioned as having "ten horns." Daniel 7:7. We may, therefore, conclude that, although no attention is drawn to the number here, the ten toes do correspond to the ten horns, and that they are intended to represent ten distinct kingdoms occupying the original territory of Western Rome.

The suggestion has been put forward that as the ten toes are divided into two groups of five, the legs represent the Eastern and Western divisions of the empire respectively, and that half of the disintegrated fragments should be looked for in each of these sections. This, however, is quite unjustifiable as the legs of the image were divided from the beginning of their separation from the trunk, whereas the division of the empire did not occur until the last days of its history.

Moreover, the metals of the image represent primarily the territory peculiar to each power and not the territory of previous powers which it absorbed. Thus the silver represents Medo-Persia which absorbed the golden empire of Babylon. The brass represents the Grecian kingdom which absorbed both Medo-Persia and Babylon. The iron kingdom represents the Roman empire outside of the three previous empires—that is, Western Rome. Consequently the toe-kingdoms, which have no admixture of gold, silver, or brass, are all to be looked for in Western Europe.

Of the many barbarian tribes occupying Central Europe east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, the Alemanni and the Franks were closest to the Roman frontiers and constituted the first waves of the invading hordes.

The Alemanni (1) were actually the "first who removed the veil that covered the feeble majesty of Italy." They swarmed over the Rhaetian Alps into what are now Alsace and Lorraine and Switzerland, the last mentioned eventually becoming the heart of their tribal domain.