

Our Firm Foundation

remnant church. So let us enter upon our study.

Contemporary Recognition of Fulfillment the Rule

Now trace with me, first of all, the great, generally recognized sequence of world empires-the unfolding of the basic outline prophecies, primarily of Daniel 2 and 7. This is foundational. These have been universally recognized by Jew, Catholic, and Protestant alike as the ABC of all prophecy. They constitute the common denominator generally assented to by all groups who study prophecy.

It is marvelous to see how, from the very dawn of prophetic interpretation onward, men have realized progressively just where they were in the advancing course of time and the divine plan and outline of the ages. And this has taken place just as rapidly as history has clearly fulfilled the prophesied events. This recognition was not simply by one man, or two, but by many men-whole groups of students of prophecy, scattered over many lands. The historical record begins with the Jews before Christ. In fact, it begins back with the Hebrew prophet Daniel himself, who expressly identified the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, and Grecian as the first three of the four world powers of God's master outline of the course of empire from Daniel's day onward.

And in the very hour of transition they were anxiously watching the change-over from Persian to Grecian domination, and applied the symbol of the swift-moving he-goat to the conquering march of Alexander, the Macedonian monarch, and declared the notable first horn to be Alexander the Great. [2] Then they watched with concern the establishment of the Roman fourth power-which they even named, as stated in their paraphrastic translation of the book of Daniel-as the next in the prophetic line to assume control.

In addition, we find that these pre-Christian Jews understood and clearly applied the year-day principle to the seventy weeks-the one and only prophetic time period of Daniel then applicable to the Jews-a prophetic truth for the time then present. God has always had a present truth a special truth for emphasis during each period along the highway of the centuries. These Jewish exegetes also clearly understood and stated that a "time" represented a year, and that "king" indicated a kingdom. And these foundational principles for all prophetic interpretation enunciated by the early Jewish church before Christ, were carried over into the Christian church and became the accepted heritage of the early church.

Men have known where they were all along the designated course of empire, and what principal events were to follow. This is a matter of simple record. In the days of Roman might and power Jew and early Christian alike then applied Daniel's prophetic fourth empire symbols to Rome. There was no question in their minds concerning the application.

Take the early Christian churchmen, the Ante-Nicene Fathers, from Justin Martyr onward. It is most astonishing to see how many of the very men who helped to lay the foundation for the great Latin departure in other matters, had this unique characteristic-that they still held tenaciously to the basic principles of sound prophetic interpretation long after certain of the other gospel foundations of the early church were crumbling and apostasy was beginning to overwhelm and distort the fundamental doctrines of the primitive church. As the mighty Amazon sweeps out into the South Atlantic for hundreds of miles, bearing its sweet, fresh water amid the surrounding brine, so the distinct stream of sound prophetic interpretation continued on until, by the fifth century, it was finally swallowed up by the surrounding apostasy.

A single early example must suffice. Hippolytus, bishop of Portus Romanus (died C. AD 236), an opponent of two of the bishops of Rome, wrote the earliest systematic commentary on the book of Daniel that has been preserved for us. In striking phrases he paralleled the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7, naming the four empires from Babylonia to Rome, identifying his own place as in the legs of iron," and the fourth beast-the then-present Roman Empire-the fourth and last of the world empire series. He then declared the breakup of Rome would be the next world-shaking event in line, portrayed through the symbolism of the succeeding ten toes and the ten horns of these chapters. [3]

And he further declared the smiting stone of Daniel 2, in the time of Rome's divisions, to be Christ coming in judgment. But most remarkable of all, he expressed the belief that the little horn of Daniel 7, springing up among the Roman divisions, represented the coming Antichrist-whose development, however, and identity as an ecclesiastical system spanning the Middle Ages he did not and could not yet envision. Rather, he wondered whether it might not be some heinous, atheistic Jew. Time was foreshortened to all these early men. They did not and could not yet grasp the stretching centuries that

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would be involved. The year-day principle had not yet been applied to the 1260 years, and the papal apostasy had not yet developed to the point of clear identification. But the grand outline was all there—the four empires, the division of Rome, the appearance of Antichrist, and finally the Second Advent.

So our teaching today, on this basic outline, is none other than the revival and restoration of the early church interpretation on the four empires, and the permanent division of the fourth. Thus we clasp hands firmly across the years with Hippolyttis and his contemporary expositors. We have simply revived and carried forward his teachings and those of others. [4] We have merely raised up the sturdy foundations of those early generations, back near the dawn of the Christian Era. That is our strength. Rome was the tremendously present fourth empire in Hippolyttis' then present-truth emphasis. And this basic concept was shared by scholars scattered from one end of the Roman Empire to the other, writing in Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Hebrew. That was indisputably the early church teaching, and it constituted a powerful group of witnesses.

Rome's Breakup, and Disintegration of Interpretation

Next comes the era of the breakup of the Roman Empire into its lesser parts, or component nations. Sulpicius Severus (died 420 AD) and Jerome (died 420 AD) are typical of this epoch, and were striking expounders in this crucial period. These and other men definitely declared that the great predicted division was now already under way. [5] The brittle clay was clearly being intermingled with the sturdy iron. Statecraft and church craft were being fatally intermingled. The breakup was a present actuality. And this now became the new point of clear contemporary recognition and concern. It was the new area of emphasis of their present truth. So we are the restorers of this added section in the foundational structure laid by the generations of the fourth and fifth centuries.

And then the next major event in the line of inspired prediction—the appearance of Antichrist, whoever he might be—was awaited with gravest apprehension. Men prayed for the continuance of the then-present Roman Empire, for they feared the more sinister depredations and persecutions of the coming Antichrist. They likewise held the clear outline of the four world powers. Many, such as Tertullian, had written that Rome was the final withholding power, [6] and that its passing would make possible the rise of Antichrist—or the beast, or little horn, as it was already variously called under the alternate symbols of Antichrist. And many feared the dread opponent would appear in the church.

Then the first great breakdown in prophetic interpretation began to take place. First subtle and then open apostasy began to appear—fatal departures from that earlier prophetic faith, brought about through the impact of such men as Origen of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Augustine of Hippo. Origen, the Neoplatonic philosopher, began first to pervert the interpretation of the prophecies by allegorizing them away from literal intent. The four empires of Daniel 2 and 7 were just spiritual progressions, advances, ascendant principles, one following the other. The literal interpretation of the promise of Christ's Second Advent was just a crude concept for the immature mind, he asserted.

Eusebius represented the first resurrection as the widespread Christian conquests through conversion of the pagans, he devil's binding typifying the restriction of his power through the early conquests of the gospel.

By Augustine the resurrection was spiritualized into the spiritual awakening of souls dead in sin, the kingdom of God was crudely carnalized and materialized into the then-present apostatizing church, and the millennium was ingeniously thrust back so as to begin with the first Advent. People were then living, Augustine stoutly asserted, in the millennial thousand years of the Apocalypse. It was a revolutionary reversal and repudiation.

Moreover, the stone that was to smite the image on the feet was already, Augustine asserted, the mountain kingdom of God, which was to fill the earth. But this, they held, was to be accomplished through man's endeavor, and the stone was to crush the nations into subjection to the advancing kingdom of God. Thus the early shadow of the coming Inquisition was already cast in those transition times, under this gross misconception. And these flanking attacks upon the early precepts of prophecy, as well as the direct attacks—by Porphyry the sophist upon the historicity of the book of Daniel, and by Dionysius striking against the apostolicity of the Apocalypse—brought tight about the collapse of early church interpretation and the obscuring of the early sound exposition. For centuries bleak shadows crept over the earth, and darkness covered the understanding of men.