

LESSON 3

For reasons which should clarify as I proceed, I am reviewing this week's lesson in a slightly different format than usual. Since our author covers his didactic ground more slowly than normal, even though he has less material than average for his students, I will begin by integrating his polemic with no more than the occasional, brief, convenient comment in transit, then close by offering my integrated critique.

Our Author's Polemic

This week our author defends an interpretation of Dan. 2 familiar to loyal Seventh-day Adventists and many conservative Christians, with the assistance of parallel passages in this book of ancient prophecy. Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, modern Europe – all of these details were unerringly fulfilled before Christ's Return!

Daniel 2 unfolds a sweeping panorama of history, an unbroken succession of world powers beginning more than five centuries before Christ and ending sometime in the future, when God's eternal kingdom will be established after Christ's return. [Monday]

Amongst the various "metals", of special interest here is the "iron", which indicates that Rome rules even in our modern era, despite the change attested by the "clay".

Daniel was correct about all the kingdoms he predicted would rise and fall. His predictions about Europe have come true with painful accuracy. [Thursday]

... the amazing accuracy with which [Daniel] predicted not only the world dominion of the Roman Empire (which hadn't happened yet) but its breakup into what became the nations of modern Europe, which—in its present state—is exactly as Daniel had written... [Friday]

A very familiar explanation indeed. But our author also slips in a *novel* nuance in order to justify his almost fleeting inclusion of Papal Rome in Daniel's predictions:

The fourth kingdom, the fourth power, arises after Greece and remains until the end, even though it is manifested in a different form. In Daniel, the fourth power, the power rising after Greece, stays the same power (for it's iron all the way through, unlike the previous powers whose metal disappeared when a whole new empire arose), though at some point it changed form. Thus, it's Rome from the time of Greece until the end of the world. Amazingly enough, Rome still exists today as a worldwide power, though its form is radically different from when it first arose after Greece. [Tuesday]

In passing, I realise that not all conservative Christians accept Rome as Daniel's fourth kingdom. I accept the consensus interpretation because I see no evidence whatever disputing that "Jesus believed that some of Daniel's prophecies were yet future", Mt. 24:15. Regardless, this moot point makes no difference to my polemic.

I also concur with our author, Wednesday, in this emphatic interpretive principle:

The prophecy says absolutely nothing about their having multiple fulfillment; that is, the kingdoms symbolizing one thing in one era, another thing in another. Considering what's named—massive empires immovably and immutably rooted in world history itself—the idea that we can somehow give these specific prophecies here in Daniel different fulfillment in different eras certainly doesn't arise from anything in the texts themselves. In short, there is absolutely no justification for the idea that this prophecy is open to different fulfillment in different times in history.

This launches his further hermeneutic of special interest to Seventh-day Adventists:

More than anything else, these verses reveal... the method for how [*sic*] we should interpret the prophecies in Daniel. Daniel 2:37-44, by interpreting the dream, contains the key to understanding the prophecies, because the texts themselves interpret the prophecies. This proves that the historicist approach to interpretation (of which Adventists remain almost alone in still adhering to [*sic*]) is what the text demands. The historicist approach teaches what Daniel 2 teaches, that these prophecies follow the sweep of human history from antiquity to eternity and that they are not focused solely on events in the far past or solely on events in the future but cover the scope of world history from the past into the future. Thus, in the first prophetic section of Daniel, we are given the key to understanding its prophecies. [Thursday]

Finally, our author briefly argues vigorously against a liberal dating of Daniel's book in the second century B.C., Friday, against which he protested right at the outset. And like the vast majority of conservative Christians, I have no argument with that:

Daniel 2 presents a powerful case for our trust in the inspiration of the Word. How someone six centuries before Christ could have outlined world history as accurately as he did is something that defies a purely natural explanation. That point is so obvious, in fact, that some people have claimed that the prophecy is *vaticinium ex eventu* (prophecy after the event), that the book of Daniel was written in the second century before Christ and that it was about only past events, events prior to it being written.

Evaluation

I commence by applauding our author's paramount interpretive principle, Friday: "As Christians, we must take the Word for what it says, as opposed to what humans say instead." And it is my earnest desire here to practise that principle myself.

Let us be perfectly clear from the very outset that conservative Christians like our author have every reason to be impressed that Daniel appears to have observed history in advance: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome – *absolutely awesome!* And of course God's eternal Kingdom is still *pending*. So surely those legs of iron mixed with clay bridge the two millennia *unbroken* between pagan Rome and us!

Regardless, our author has confessed that, like us all, he struggles with objectivity. And sadly, his *sola scriptura* principle will soon verify that after Rome, at least one *a priori* supposition creeps in unobtrusively, taking *complete* control of subsequent interpretation! This involves *the very nature of Bible prophecy*. Before Daniel speaks for himself here, decisively at that, it is helpful to glance at Holy Writ further afield. For *sola scriptura* means that *it should teach us its own intention with prophecy*.

Sacred Scripture's Prime Principle of Prophetic Interpretation

Yahweh shared with Daniel's fellow prophet Jeremiah the overarching principle of prophetic interpretation, 18:7-10, which was soon exemplified quite decisively, 26:1-19:

If at *any* time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned *repents* of its evil, then I will *relent* and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at *another* time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does *evil* in my sight and does not obey me, then I will *reconsider* the good I had intended to do for it.

Seventh-day Adventists know full well that Jonah was very familiar with this principle of *conditionality*. Indeed, this is why he fled from his call, 4:1f.! Yet they would do well to face the full force of the fact that *Daniel was equally familiar with it*, 9:19!

A simple illustration may assist here. The best way to personalise a residence is to plan it from the outset. By the time a builder is selected, the owners have formalised their *intentions* in a set of detailed plans. However, during construction it often happens that such intentions *alter*, either by the clearer perspective offered by bare concrete and unclad wall frames, or by circumstances, for example, financial.

At the risk of ridicule, the relevant question is, Do such alterations reach back in time and modify the *blueprint*? Of course not! Yet, despite their sincerity, in effect, *this is precisely what advocates of historicism do with conditional prophecy!* For, by virtue of their hermeneutic, their history books *must* record every fulfilled detail. And behold: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome! How, then, can any student of Bible prophecy responsibly fail to conclude that modern Europe and its evolution were Yahweh's *original* meaning in Nebuchadnezzar's amalgam of iron and clay?

In brief, historicists face the peril of *reading conditional forecasts*, in whole or part, *through their history books*, not by the most scrupulous *exegesis* of Holy Writ! Let us sit humbly at Daniel's feet, then, as he reveals the *primary* purpose of his book.

In other words, *whatever history's annals eventually recorded*, we will first seek a clear concept of his inspired *blueprint*. For *to speak of fulfilment is otherwise futile*.

The Primary Purpose of the Book of Daniel

Babylon's Final Monarch

To begin, Nebuchadnezzar's complex statue was never meant as history in advance primarily, if at all. And to grasp its divine intent is a major step in comprehending the entire book. First and foremost, *it documents Yahweh's most intense effort in the entire OT to woo a very prominent pagan to worship and serve him*.

This is best observed in Nebuchadnezzar's second dream, 4:10-17. There can be no mistaking the import of its solitary symbol of a huge tree "providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air", 21. For Daniel himself interprets it in these words, 22:

[Y]ou, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches to the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

However, Daniel interprets this dream's dark side faithfully as well, if reticently, 25f.: You... will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass... until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes... [Y]our kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules.

And this arrogant monarch, 30, has just one way to avoid such sustained humiliation, 27. Observe the *conditionality* of this entire forecast in the choice he faces:

Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that **then** your prosperity will continue.

Tragically, Babylon's illustrious ruler spurned his prophet's splendid advice totally. So his second dream was fulfilled in its most minute details: "All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar", 28, confirming that *they all applied to him personally*.

With this tree symbolism in sharp focus, compare these strikingly similar details – even down to ruling over "the beasts of the field" and "the birds of the air"! – likewise in Daniel's explanation of the golden head of Nebuchadnezzar's statue:

You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. **You are that head of gold.** 2:37f.

That is, he again identifies Nebuchadnezzar *personally*, not simply as the king of Babylon but precisely its *last* monarch. Yet the major dilemma for all historicists is that he wasn't! That dubious distinction fell to Belshazzar, his peccant grandson.

Here some astute Bible student may object since Jeremiah forecast that Judah's neighbours would be enslaved, until Babylon fell, by "Nebuchadnezzar... and his son and his grandson", Jer. 27:6f. The manifest inference, in context, is that Judah would serve all three, too. Then do I err in concluding that Daniel warned Nebuchadnezzar that he would be Babylon's final ruler? Quite apart from the historical realities – there were *four* kings to Belshazzar: Evil-Merodach, Neriglissar, Labashi-Marduk, Nabonidus – Belshazzar's demise offers my deduction its striking support.

First, though, a passing comment on royal Babylonian history. I am well aware of the difficulties facing historians in confirming that Belshazzar was a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover, although Daniel speaks of the former as a son of the latter, 5:18, 22, in Scripture such terms may be employed loosely to designate ancestry more broadly. As for Belshazzar's regality, these days it is well established historically that in his later years his father Nabonidus established him as coregent.

As Belshazzar quails at the supernatural writing on the wall, Dan. 5:5f., Daniel rebukes him sharply with Nebuchadnezzar's experience, 18-21. The clear inference, 22f., is that he should have heeded his ancestor's lofty example, albeit belated, of contrition, 4:13, 37. *His obduracy caused his nation's demise*. For the handwriting specifically responded to his turpitude: "Therefore he... wrote the inscription", 24.

Please note, it goes far beyond simply condemning Belshazzar *personally*. Its dire climax is the very downfall of Babylon: "Your **kingdom** is... given to the Medes and Persians", 28. Yet that need *never* have occurred – at least, until God's Kingdom obsolesced it. In saving mercy he extended Nebuchadnezzar's noble reign. Even his patience finally expired, though, through Belshazzar's drunken sacrilege.

In brief, the first five chapters of the Book of Daniel provide forceful confirmation for the conclusion that *all of its major predictions were conditional, never deterministic*.

What did Daniel *Really* Forecast as Following Rome?

The second thoroughly fatal flaw for historicism in Nebuchadnezzar's initial dream is that *he never views more than those four world empires here* – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome. Nowhere are those minor "ten", so extremely significant for Seventh-day Adventists in supposedly symbolising modern Europe, to be seen. Two quite distinct, related lines of evidence will suffice to prove this decisive fact.

First, Daniel does not even predict that the fourth kingdom will break up into ten! Carefully observe his precise words: “(T)here will be **a** fourth kingdom,” and “**it** will crush and break”, 40; “this will be **a** divided kingdom; yet **it** will have some of the strength of iron in **it**,” 41. In a word, “**this** kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle”, 42. Nothing here even hints that this fourth world empire will fissure into separate kingdoms! And sadly, our author’s ingenious opinion that it is papal Rome which lingers in the iron is quite effete since the nations of modern Europe scarcely qualify for consideration as a weak yet *integral* part of Roman Catholicism.

This applies even to the Aramaic verb *pēlag*, which is rendered *divided* in 41. It is not employed elsewhere in the entire OT, but its cognate noun *pēlūggâ* is applied in Ezra 6:18 to the *sub*-division of the *single* priestly office, 1 Chr. 24:1-19. The fourth kingdom would be unstable, therefore, but none the less simply one *single* empire.

Secondly, the striking climax of Daniel’s whole prediction is that the rock “struck the statue on the feet... and smashed them”, 2:34. The inspired interpretation, 44, is the commencement of God’s eternal Kingdom. Above all, “(i)t will crush **all those kingdoms** and bring them to an end”. Nor are they the nations of modern Europe, despite Seventh-day Adventism’s missionary zeal. The rock smashed far more than the statue’s feet. For maximum emphasis, it is in his very summary, 45, that Daniel explicitly explains that the rock “broke the *iron*, the *bronze*, the *clay*, the *silver* and the *gold* to pieces.” Furthermore, the relatively random sequence of the constituent components in this list invites the conclusion that they were all broken **concurrently**. More importantly, it is Daniel himself who underscores this very point. The rock “struck the statue on its feet... and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces **at the same time**”, 34f.

Here, then, is a superb test of the *bona fides* of every student of Bible prophecy who, like our author, claims to practise the principle, *sola scriptura*. Just as clearly as human diction can possibly convey meaning, Daniel’s simple forecast is this. When the rock strikes Nebuchadnezzar’s composite statue upon its feet, it pulverises it **in toto**. So “all those kingdoms” crushed by God’s eternal Kingdom, 44, are the four, not the altogether suppositious “ten”. In fact, precisely the same Aramaic verb *dēgaq* appears in 34, 35, 44 and 45 behind the verbs *break*, *crush* and *smash*.

Simply stated, *all four “universal” kingdoms* – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome – *were originally scheduled for annihilation simultaneously at the Eschaton*. The unequivocal reality that *nothing even remotely like that has ever happened* is mute yet most eloquent testimony that Daniel’s initial prediction was **conditional**. Indeed, had Babylon not fallen, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome may **never** have swelled history’s protracted panorama! Its *realities* do not deny that Daniel *expected* Nebuchadnezzar to be Babylon’s last king, *unless he humbled himself before God*.

“But what about the fourth beast in Dan. 7?”, I hear a host of devout Seventh-day Adventists protest. “Its horns are ten kingdoms which it spawns!” Of course they are. There is no mistaking the inspired interpretation in 24. However, this is no hindrance whatever to my polemic. Only, I would beg my readers’ patience until next week, when our author can be offered the courtesy of first presenting his polemic.

Meantime, it is an important evaluation of my entire perspective to step back even further to ponder Daniel’s book in the broader context of God’s Word as a whole.

The Book of Daniel in Broad, Temporal Perspective

Daniel’s final vision concludes with the directive: “close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase **knowledge**”, 12:4. He craves enlightenment, 8, but the rebuff is decisive: “Go your way, Daniel, because *the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end*... None of the wicked will **understand**, but those who are wise will **understand**”, 9f. The intimation beyond all petty quibble is that *the Book of Daniel could not be understood until it was all finally unsealed*. Equally transparently, such a decisive facilitation would be completely impossible in any era prior to the time of the End.

Jesus' imperative words to his contemporaries in Mt. 24:15 are therefore especially significant in revealing the genuine nature of Daniel's book: "[W]hen you see... the abomination that causes desolation, spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader *understand*". Even without the constraint that Jesus chose the verb *noein*, cognate with Daniel's *dianoesthai* in the Septuagint, the clear inference is that *his book was fully open for mastery in Roman times*, almost two whole millennia ago. This is no surprise since at least twice it predicts pagan Rome's demise *at the Eschaton*. It did not remain sealed till around 1844, as Seventh-day Adventists claim.

The corollary is that *Daniel's forecasts were never meant to stretch past Jesus' era!* And, although the strict limits of this review preclude detail, this chimes perfectly with the fact that the NT is replete with expectations of his Return *in its very day*.

Likewise, in stark contrast to Daniel, John the Revelator is commanded: "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is *near*", 22:10. One must ask, then, if Seventh-day Adventism has even begun to think very carefully through its thesis, especially if it views Daniel as John's major source. For it implies the sheer nonsense that the Revelation, *never* sealed since its first-century genesis, is founded firmly upon the Book of Daniel, sealed until the 19th century!

Summary

Very commendably, our author insists that we all "take the Word for what it says". And at first sight, he seems persuasively to have justified *historicism*, his Church's crucial ideology of prophetic interpretation, in Nebuchadnezzar's first dream, Dan. 2. Do the annals of history not record its *incessant* march beyond Babylon as Medo-Persia, then Greece, then Rome? And is God's everlasting Kingdom not still *future*? Then surely simple consistency invites us to view the *incessant* march of history between pagan Rome and our day – *Europe's development* – in his dream, too!

Sadly, however inadvertently, our author soon succumbs to a major, *a priori* supposition as to the *nature* of Bible prophecy that controls interpretation beyond Rome. For if we permit Daniel to teach us his *own* inspired purpose, the paramount, *sola scriptura* axiom quickly labels his prime predictions *conditional*, not *deterministic*.

In brief, the Book of Daniel was never designed as history in advance but as a record, initially, of Yahweh's supreme effort, *inherently conditional*, to convert Nebuchadnezzar, a prominent gentile. Likewise, Babylon need *never* have fallen had Belshazzar shown reverent humility like his illustrious ancestor. Even then, it is quite obvious already that God did not inspire his prophet to predict what he knew full well such monarchs would do. For one thing, Nebuchadnezzar was not Babylon's last king. For another, human history has lingered long past the fall of pagan Rome.

Addendum

For decades official Seventh-day Adventist literature was happy to depict the Book of Daniel in these broad terms: "The historical section... reveals... the true philosophy of history... By providing a detailed account of God's dealings with... Babylon, the book enables us to understand the meaning of the rise and fall of other nations in the prophetic portion of the book." *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary 4* (Washington: R&H, 1955), 750. Commenting likewise on 4:17: "God's dealings with Babylon and its king were to be an illustration to other nations and their kings of the results of accepting or rejecting the divine plan with respect to nations." *Ibid.*, 790.

The astute reader will also observe that the anonymous author(s) who penned these sentiments actually borrowed them largely from Ellen White's writings. Her stance is summarised in these unequivocal words, Ed 176f. (compare PK 535):

Every nation that has come upon the stage of action has been permitted to occupy its place on the earth, that it might be seen whether it would fulfill the purpose of "the Watcher and the Holy One." Prophecy has traced the rise and fall of the world's great empires—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. With each of these, as with nations of less power, history repeats itself. Each had its period of test, each failed, its glory faded, its power departed, and its place was occupied by another.

I have done no more here than to agree that Daniel recorded *conditional* prophecy.