

The Ram, the He-Goat, and the King of the North

Daniel Chapter 8:1–9 · May 22, 2013

A Change in Language — A Change in Focus

There is a notable feature of the book of Daniel that is easy to miss but worth pausing on. From chapter 2 through the end of chapter 7, the text is written in Aramaic — the common language of the Gentile world. That section of the book is dominated by Gentile kings and their kingdoms: Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, the four great empires, the little horn of the fourth beast. It has a Gentile flavour throughout.

But beginning with chapter 8, the Spirit of God switches back to the Hebrew language, and it is no coincidence that what follows has very much to do with the Jewish people. The remaining chapters of Daniel turn their attention toward Israel, toward Jerusalem, toward the sanctuary. The shift in language signals the shift in focus. This distinction matters, and it bears on a question that runs beneath the surface of these chapters: when prophecy speaks of the future, who does it concern? The answer the book itself gives, through its very structure, is that the end-times dealings of God on the earth are dealings with Israel and with Jerusalem.

Israel, the Promises, and the Faithfulness of God

This leads directly to a more pointed question: has God set aside Israel and transferred her promises to the church? There is a school of thought, sometimes called covenant theology or replacement theology, that says exactly this — that the Lord is finished with the Jewish people, and that believers in Christ are the

true Israel who will inherit all that was promised to Abraham.

The answer from Scripture is plain. Romans 11:29 states that the gifts and calling of God are not subject to repentance — that is, God does not change His mind about the promises He has made. And the context of that entire chapter of Romans is not God's dealings with Christian believers, but His dealings with Israel. The very first verse of Romans 11 puts the question directly:

*I say then, has God cast away his people? Far be the thought! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. —
Romans 11:1*

Paul's answer is not merely that God has not cast away the church. It is that he has not cast away the specific, literal, genealogical seed of Abraham. And when we go back to Genesis 12, 13, and 15, the promises are unmistakable in their particularity. The land was promised to Abraham and to his seed. The same Hebrew word for 'seed' used when God foretold the Egyptian bondage — a bondage that was literally fulfilled by Abraham's literal descendants — is the word used for those who will inherit the land. God was not playing a linguistic trick. He meant what He said.

The natural mind, even a brilliant one, can work its way to the conclusion that these things all apply to believers in Christ — as long as it begins with that conclusion and then reasons backward through the text. But that is precisely the wrong way to read Scripture. The right way is to ask: what is God telling me here? And what God says here is that He has made promises to Abraham's seed, and He keeps His promises.

Israel today is His people in unrepentance, as a parent's child can be their child even when estrangement has come in. The estrangement does not dissolve the relationship. God's eye is still upon them, His heart is still towards Jerusalem, and His purposes will yet unfold in that city and with that people.

Daniel 8 and the Vision in Shushan

This vision comes in the third year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon — the last Babylonian king before the Medes and Persians took the kingdom. In the vision, Daniel stands by the river Ulai in the province of Elam and sees a ram with two horns, one higher than the other, pushing in every direction — westward, northward, and southward — and no power could stand against it. Then a he-goat comes from the west with breathtaking speed, a great horn between its eyes, and it smashes the ram utterly. But at the height of the goat's power, the great horn is broken, and four notable horns arise in its place toward the four winds of heaven. Out of one of these four comes a little horn, growing exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the pleasant land.

The interpretation is not left to our imagination. Gabriel provides it directly in the same chapter. The ram's two horns are the kings of Media and Persia. The he-goat is the king of Greece, and the great horn between his eyes is its first king. This is how we understand these things — not by laying prophecy over history and finding our best match, but by reading what the Scripture itself tells us.

The ram that thou sawest having the two horns, they are the kings of Media and Persia, and the rough goat is the king of Greece, and the great horn that was between his eyes is the first king. — Daniel 8:20–21

The Ram: Medo-Persia

The two horns of the ram represent the two peoples that made up the combined kingdom. The higher horn came up last — and this fits precisely. The Medes were the senior partner initially, but Persia grew to dominate and subsume the Median element. One horn was higher than the other. The ram pushed in all directions, becoming great — and no power could stand against it. It did according to its will.

One detail is worth noting: the ram pushes westward, northward, and southward, but not eastward. The Medo-Persian empire was already extended eastward — pushing eastward would merely have been pressing into territory it already held. The expansion that distinguished it was in the other three directions.

The He-Goat: Alexander the Great and the Division of His Kingdom

The he-goat comes from the west over the face of the whole earth, and it touched not the ground. This is a vivid description of the speed of conquest. Alexander the Great moved his armies with extraordinary rapidity across an enormous stretch of territory — no ancient conqueror took so much in so short a time. In his early thirties he was the most powerful ruler on earth, and then he died. The great horn was broken at the height of the he-goat's power.

In its place arose four notable horns toward the four winds of heaven. Alexander's generals divided his empire among themselves after his death: Cassander took Greece and Macedon; Lysimachus took Thrace and parts of Asia Minor; Seleucus took Syria and the east; and Ptolemy took Egypt. Four kingdoms stood up out of the nation — but not with Alexander's power. Self-will was at work in those who stood up; the Scripture does not say they were raised up, which would imply God's hand, but that they stood up, asserting their own.

The Little Horn: The King of the North

Out of one of those four kingdoms — the Seleucid, which was north of Israel — there came forth a little horn that grew exceedingly great. It moved toward the south, toward the east, and toward the pleasant land. That last phrase is significant: from God's perspective, the pleasant land is Israel. The beauty of the earth, in His estimation, is His people and His city. Everything in these prophecies is oriented from Jerusalem outward. The kings that are north of Israel are kings of the north; those to the south are kings of the south.

This figure is called by various names in Scripture. He is the king of the north here in Daniel 8, and he is the Assyrian in Isaiah 10, where God calls him 'the rod of mine anger' and 'the staff of mine indignation' sent against His people. Different names bring out different aspects, but they converge on the same person. He is not the same as the little horn of Daniel 7, who arises from the revived Roman Empire in the west. This one springs from the north and turns specifically against God's earthly people.

The reason God takes particular interest in this man is exactly that: he turns toward the pleasant land. Nations rise and fall, empires clash and crumble, and these things are recorded in history. But when a man sets his face toward Israel, toward the sanctuary, toward the place where God's name dwells, God takes notice. Whether His people are going on faithfully or not, that is His testimony in the earth, and He will not overlook those who interfere with it.

And it became great even to the host of heaven, and it cast down some of the host of heaven and of the stars to the ground, and trampled upon them. And he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and from him the continual sacrifice was taken away, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down. — Daniel 8:10–11

Historical Fulfilment and Prophetic Remainder

There was a man in history who provides a partial fulfilment of what is described here. Antiochus Epiphanes, in the period of the Maccabees, came from the Seleucid north, invaded Jerusalem, defiled the temple, caused the sacrifices to cease, and set up an abomination there. The books of the Maccabees record the resistance of those faithful Jews who would not yield to him. His actions give substance and colour to what Daniel foresaw.

But Gabriel is explicit that the full vision is for the time of the end. Antiochus is, at most, a forerunner, a partial type. The things described in their fullest sense

await the latter days. The clock that Daniel sees is not exhausted by ancient history — it runs to a set time that God alone has fixed. There is a span between Alexander's generals and the end; in that span a parenthesis has been inserted, the time during which the Lord has been gathering a heavenly people. When that parenthesis closes, the prophetic calendar of Daniel resumes its count.

This is why the prophecy cannot be treated as mere history — interesting and accurate though it is with respect to the events it foretold. Gabriel says plainly: the vision is for the time of the end. Those things which have a historical fulfilment point beyond themselves to a greater and final fulfilment yet to come.