

# The Four Empires of Daniel's Prophecies

Daniel's book prophesied events fulfilled many centuries ago as well as major events yet to come. It reveals a history of the region, written in advance, from Daniel's time right up to the return of Jesus Christ.



Daniel foretold the rise of empires such as Greece and Rome hundreds of years before these events took place. The Parthenon in Athens stands as a reminder of Greece's power.

**A**mong the Jewish captives taken from Judah and exiled to Babylon was a young man whose Hebrew name was Daniel, renamed Belteshazzar by the Babylonians (**Daniel 1:1-7**). Daniel lived in the remarkable times of the downfall of the kingdoms of both Judah and Babylon. He served as a high official in both the Babylonian government and that of its successor, the Medo-Persian Empire.

Yet at the end of the book God instructed Daniel to “shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase” (**Daniel 12:4**). This indicates that certain major prophecies that previously wouldn't have made sense will be understandable as the end approaches.

The prophecies of Daniel provide proof of the accuracy of the Bible. Many of his prophecies are so detailed and specific that they have long confounded Bible critics.

In fact, some skeptics have not challenged the content of Daniel's prophetic accuracy. Rather than admit that his words are indeed inspired, they have simply labeled his book a fraud. They claim that it was not written by Daniel in the sixth century B.C.—timing which is evident by events written of in the book—but that it was penned by an unknown author in the 160s B.C., long after many of the events prophesied in the book came to pass. This, the critics allege, is the real reason for the book's startling prophetic accuracy!

Daniel's testimony challenges the critics. But let's first consider the nature of the critics' approach. They dispute Daniel's authorship because he refers to himself in the early chapters in the third person, as if writing about someone else. However, as *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* points out, this "was the custom among ancient authors of historical memoirs ..." (1985, Vol. 7, p. 4). In relating some of his experiences Daniel did write in the first person (**Daniel 7:15; Daniel 8:15; Daniel 9:2; Daniel 10:2**).

The identity of Daniel's critics is significant as well. The first person to question the authenticity of Daniel's authorship was the Greek scholar and historian Porphyry, who lived A.D. 233-304. He is labeled by historians as a Neoplatonist, which means he subscribed to the doctrines of the Greek philosopher Plato rather than the Bible. "Porphyry is well known as a violent opponent of Christianity and defender of Paganism" ( *Encyclopaedia Britannica* , 11th edition, Vol. 22, p. 104, "Porphyry").

Since Porphyry was an enemy of Christianity, his objectivity is open to question. He had no factual basis for his opinion, and his view contradicted the testimony of Jesus Christ, who referred to Daniel as the author of the book (**Matthew 24:15**).

The biblical scholar Jerome (A.D. 340-420) refuted Porphyry's contention. Thereafter no one took Porphyry's remarks seriously again until many centuries later. "... He was more or less dismissed by Christian scholarship as a mere pagan detractor who had allowed a naturalistic bias to warp his judgment. But during the time of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, all supernatural elements in Scripture came under suspicion ..." ( *Expositor's* , p. 13).

Some of today's scholars with liberal leanings have recycled these centuries- old arguments. Old Testament historian Eugene Merrill says their beliefs are built on feeble evidence. "[Daniel's] rhetoric and language are eminently at home in the sixth century [B.C.] ... It is only on the most subjective and circular lines of evidence that the man and his writing have been denied historicity" ( *Kingdom of Priests* , 1996, p. 484).

## Phenomenal prophecy and fulfillment

The accuracy of Daniel's prophecies of remotely distant events is spectacular. For example, in the "70 weeks" prophecy recorded in **Daniel 9:24-27**, "Daniel predicts the precise year of Christ's appearance and the beginning of his ministry in A.D. 27" ( *Expositor's* , p. 9).

Another amazing prophecy recorded by Daniel is his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2. In the second year of his reign the Babylonian king had a troubling dream that none of his counselors could explain. Babylonian culture placed considerable emphasis on dreams, and Nebuchadnezzar was convinced that this one was of great importance (**Daniel 2:1-3**).

His dream gives us a “disclosure of God’s plan for the ages till the final triumph of Christ” and “presents the foreordained succession of world powers that are to dominate the Near East till the final victory of the Messiah in the last days” ( *Expositor’s* , pp. 39, 46).

Without prior knowledge of its content, Daniel explained the details of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar: “You, O king, were watching; and behold, a great image! This great image, whose splendor was excellent, stood before you; and its form was awesome. This image’s head was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay” (**Daniel 2:31-33**).

Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that his Babylonian Empire was represented by the head of gold (**Daniel 2:37-38**). The silver, bronze and iron components of the image, or statue, represented three powerful empires that were to follow mighty Babylon (**Daniel 2:39-40**).

This interpretation provided an astounding preview of history. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream occurred and was interpreted by Daniel about 600 B.C. The image represented, in symbolic form, the sequence of great empires that would dominate the region’s political scene for centuries.

“The silver empire was to be Medo-Persia, which began with Cyrus the Great, who conquered Babylon in 539 ... This silver empire was supreme in the Near and Middle East for about two centuries” ( *Expositor’s* , p. 47).

“The bronze empire was the Greco-Macedonian Empire established by Alexander the Great ... The bronze kingdom lasted for about 260 or 300 years before it was supplanted by the fourth kingdom” (ibid.).



“Iron connotes toughness and ruthlessness and describes the Roman Empire that reached its widest extent under the reign of Trajan” (ibid.). Trajan reigned as emperor A.D. 98-117, and the Roman Empire itself ruled for many centuries.

The fourth empire was depicted as having 10 toes. The feet and toes were composed partly of iron and partly of clay, as verse 41 explains. “Verse 41 deals with a later phase or outgrowth of this fourth empire, symbolized by the feet and ten toes—made up of iron and earthenware, a fragile base for the huge monument. The text clearly implies that this final phase will be marked by some sort of federation rather than by a powerful single realm” (ibid.). (For more details, request or download our free booklet *The Book of Revelation Unveiled* (</bible-study-tools/booklets/the-book-of-revelation-unveiled>). )

### **Another dream adds important details**

Additional aspects of this succession of world-ruling empires were revealed to Daniel in a later dream. This time the four empires were represented by four beasts: a lion (Babylonian Empire), a bear (Medo-Persian Empire), a leopard (Greco-Macedonian Empire) and a fourth beast described as “terrible” and unlike the other three (**Daniel 7:1-7**).

Notice what verse 7 says about this fourth creature: “After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, exceedingly strong. It had huge iron teeth [paralleling the iron legs of the prior dream]; it was devouring, breaking in pieces, and trampling the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns.”

What does this description mean? It too is a reference to the great power of Rome, which crushed all who opposed it. “Thus the superior power of the colossus of Rome ... is emphasized in the symbolism of this terrible fourth beast” ( *Expositor’s*

, p. 87).

**Daniel 7:8** elaborates on the 10 horns: “I was considering the horns, and there was another horn, a little one, coming up among them, before whom three of the first horns were plucked out by the roots.” Later in the chapter we see that this little horn exalts himself to the position of an internationally powerful religious leader (**Daniel 7:24-25**), even commanding a false religious system that persecutes the true followers of God.

**Daniel 7:9-14** takes us right through to Christ’s establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth: “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed.” So this Roman system, through its periodic revivals down through history, continues right to the time of the end when Jesus Christ returns to rule the earth.

Revelation 17 also helps us in understanding this end-time power. In this chapter it is again depicted as a beast, but now we see that its final manifestation includes 10 “kings”—leaders of nations or groups of nations—who “receive authority for one hour” with the ruler of this end-time superpower, an individual the Bible refers to as “the beast” (**Revelation 17:12-13**). This final revival of the Roman Empire leads into Christ’s return as they “make war with the Lamb” (**Revelation 17:14**).

All of this concurs with **Daniel 2:44**, which obviously indicates that the second coming of Christ will occur in a time during which vestiges of the fourth beast or kingdom (the Roman Empire) still exist: “And in the days of these kings the God of

heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”

The greater part of these prophetic events, as detailed by the two dreams, has already been fulfilled. Their detailed completion affirms the divine inspiration of the Bible. The odds of any person foreseeing this on his own defy credibility. “... There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days” (**Daniel 2:28**).

## **The Bible’s most detailed prophecy**

Daniel 11 records another phenomenal prophecy. The chronological setting is given in **Daniel 10:1** as the “third year of Cyrus king of Persia.” A “man” (**Daniel 10:5**), no doubt an angel (compare **Daniel 9:21**), came to tell Daniel what would occur “in the latter days” (**Daniel 10:14**).

The prophecy that follows is the most detailed in all the Bible. The third year of Cyrus was more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. Yet this prophecy foretells events that began to occur almost immediately and will continue until the return of Christ. The initial stages of the prophecy confirm the Bible because they have already been fulfilled, as can be verified by a study of the Persian and Greek empires. No man could foresee such fine historical detail.

Some elements of what follows are intricate, requiring close attention. But a comparison of the prophetic words with the historical record makes them clear.

## **Protracted political intrigue**

The first 35 verses of Daniel 11 give an account, written years in advance, of the intrigue between two political entities— the “king of the South” and the “king of the North.” In secular history, the king of the South is often referred to as Ptolemy. The Ptolemaic dynasty ruled from Alexandria in Egypt. The king of the North ruled from Antioch in Syria under the name Seleucus, or Antiochus.

With this in mind, let’s examine some of the details of the prophecy. It is important because it reveals the political climate and tensions in the Middle East preceding both the first and second appearances of Jesus Christ as the Messiah. In both instances, Jerusalem is at the center of the political conflicts of the time.

You can find more information on the historical fulfillment of much of this prophecy in resources such as *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* , which we quote below, or other reliable reference works. Rather than our quoting the entire scriptural passage, we recommend that you read in your own Bible the verses we cite, and remember that these details were foretold far in advance of their occurrence.

**Daniel 11:2:** The “three more kings” are Cambyses, the elder son of Cyrus; pseudo-Smerdis, an impostor who passed himself off as Cyrus’s younger son, who had been secretly killed; and Darius the Persian. “The Persian king who invaded Greece was ... Xerxes, who reigned 485-464 B.C.” ( *Expositor’s* , p. 128).

**Daniel 11:3-4:** “Verse 3 introduces us to ... the rise of Alexander the Great” (ibid.). The language in verse 4 “clearly suggests that this mighty conqueror was going to have a comparatively brief reign ... In seven or eight years he accomplished the most dazzling military conquest in human history. But he lived only four years more; and ... died of a fever in 323 ...” (ibid.).

Alexander's kingdom was divided "among four smaller and weaker empires" (Expositor's, p. 129). Alexander's infant son had been murdered in 310 and an illegitimate brother assassinated in 317. "Thus there were no descendants or blood relatives to succeed Alexander himself" (ibid.). So his kingdom was not divided among his posterity (verse 4).

Alexander's generals warred for control of his empire. The ensuing struggles for domination eliminated all but four, who became heads of the four divisions of his empire. The four were Cassander, reigning in Greece and the West, Lysimachus in Thrace and Asia Minor, Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucus in Syria. Of these four, two—Ptolemy and Seleucus—expanded their rule and territory. These were the kings of Egypt and Syria, respectively.

The machinations that follow relate to these two. They are referred to as the king of the South (Ptolemy) and the king of the North (Seleucus) because of their location relative to Jerusalem.

**Daniel 11:5:** "The king of the South was to be Ptolemy I" ( *Expositor's* , p. 130). The biblical expression "one of his princes" refers to Seleucus. He had originally served under Ptolemy. In the intrigue after Alexander's death, Seleucus ultimately gained control over Syria and became king of the North. Seleucus eventually wielded more power than Ptolemy. The dynasty of the Seleucid line was to continue until 64 B.C.

## **The Laodicean war**

**Daniel 11:6:** A state of tension and hostility existed between the king of the South and the king of the North. Ptolemy I died in 285 B.C. In 252 the two powers attempted a treaty under which Berenice, the daughter of Ptolemy II, was to marry Antiochus II, the king of the North. Laodice, the first wife of Antiochus II, was

angry because he had divorced her. In retaliation, she manipulated a conspiracy from her place of banishment. She had Berenice and her infant son assassinated. “Not long afterward the king himself [Antiochus II] was poisoned ...” (ibid.).

Laodice established herself as queen, because her son Seleucus II was too young to rule. The prophecy “she [Berenice] shall be given up” refers to the coup that Laodice engineered to effect the execution of Berenice. Some nobles who had supported Berenice as queen were also brought down.

**Daniel 11:7-9:** Retaliation followed. A series of military actions, which came to be known as the Laodicean War, resulted. Ptolemy II died soon after Laodice killed his daughter, Berenice. Ptolemy III sought to avenge his sister’s death. He attacked the king of the North and captured the Syrian capital of Antioch. Verse 8 describes the recapture by Ptolemy of “long-lost idols and sacred treasures” ( *Expositor’s* , p. 131) that had been stolen from Egypt by Cambyses in 524 B.C.

Peace was concluded between Ptolemy III and Seleucus II in 240, and hostilities ceased until 221, when Ptolemy III died.

**Daniel 11:10-12 :** The sons of Seleucus II attacked the king of the South after their father died. One of these sons, Seleucus III, reigned for only three years. His military activity was relatively minor. He died by poisoning. Another son, Antiochus III (the Great), did “overwhelm and pass through.” He conquered Judea.

Ptolemy IV, the king of the South, retaliated (verse 11) and defeated the larger army of Seleucus III at the Battle of Raphia. After his victory Ptolemy turned to a life of debauchery during which he slaughtered tens of thousands of Jews in Egypt (verse 12). Through all this he weakened his kingdom.

**Daniel 11:13-16:** The phrase “at the end of some years” refers to an incident when, 14 years after his defeat, Antiochus III came against Ptolemy V, still a young boy. (Ptolemy IV had died in 203.) The Egyptian provinces were in turmoil because of the wretched rule of Ptolemy IV. Many of the people—including Jews sympathetic to the king of the North—joined with Antiochus against the king of the South. The rebellion was ultimately crushed by the Egyptian general Scopos (verse 14).

Scopos also rebuffed the forces of Antiochus during the winter of 201-200. The king of the North responded with another invasion. He captured the city of Sidon (“a fortified city”), where Scopos surrendered (verse 15). Antiochus acquired complete control of the Holy Land, the “Glorious Land” (verse 16).

**Daniel 11:17:** The Revised English Bible reads: “He [the king of the North] will resolve to advance with the full might of his kingdom; and, when he has agreed terms with the king of the south, he will give his young daughter in marriage to him, with a view to the destruction of the kingdom; but the treaty will not last nor will it be his purpose which is served.” Having defeated Scopos, Antiochus desired to gain control of Egypt itself. He gave his daughter, Cleopatra, to Ptolemy V in marriage. Antiochus believed she would act in his favor and betray the interests of her husband. But she frustrated his plans by siding with Ptolemy.

**Daniel 11:18-19 :** In his frustration, Antiochus attacked islands and cities of the Aegean area. He also gave asylum to Rome’s enemy, Hannibal of Carthage, who assisted him in landing in Greece. Rome responded by attacking Antiochus and inflicting defeat on his forces. The Romans deprived him of much of his territory and took several hostages to Rome, including Antiochus’s son. Rome exacted heavy tribute of him (verse 18).

Antiochus returned in disgrace to his stronghold, Antioch. Unable to pay the heavy fees exacted by the Romans, he attempted to plunder a pagan temple. His action so enraged local inhabitants that they killed him, bringing him to an inglorious end (verse 19).

**Daniel 11:20:** While not Scripture, the apocryphal book of **3:7-40** says that Antiochus's other son, Seleucus IV, was also unable to pay the taxes. Seleucus sent a Jew, Heliodorus, to plunder the temple at Jerusalem. Heliodorus went to the holy city but obtained nothing. Seleucus was later poisoned by Heliodorus, and so killed, "but not in anger or in battle."

## Antiochus Epiphanes

**Daniel 11:21-35:** These verses speak of the infamous Antiochus IV (known also as Epiphanes), the brother of Seleucus IV, who had earlier been taken hostage to Rome. He was a "tyrannical oppressor who did his utmost to destroy the Jewish religion altogether" (Expositor's, p. 136).

Antiochus passed laws that forbade the practice of the Jewish religion, under penalty of death. He was a man of incredible cruelty. On his orders "an aged Scribe, Eleazar, was flogged to death because he refused to eat swine's flesh. A mother and her seven children were successively butchered, in the presence of the governor, for refusing to pay homage to an image. Two mothers who had circumcised their newborn sons were driven through the city and cast headlong from the wall" (Charles Pfeiffer, *Between the Testaments* , 1974, pp. 81-82).

**Daniel 11:31:** This refers to the momentous events of Dec. 16, 168 B.C., when a crazed Antiochus entered Jerusalem and killed 80,000 men, women and children (**5:11-14**). He then desecrated the temple by offering a sacrifice to the chief Greek



god, Zeus. This outrage was a forerunner of a comparable event that Jesus Christ said would occur in the last days (**Matthew 24:15**).

**Daniel 11:32-35:** These verses appear to describe, on one level, the indomitable will and courage of the Maccabees, a family of priests who resisted Antiochus and his successors. The Maccabees' revolt against the Syrian king was triggered when "Mattathias, the leading priest in the city of Modein ..., after killing the officer of Antiochus who had come to enforce the new decree concerning idolatrous worship ..., led a guerrilla band that fled to the hills ..." (*Expositor's*, p. 141).

Mattathias was aided in his cause by five sons, most notably Judah or Judas, nicknamed Maqqaba (Aramaic for hammer, whence derives the name Maccabees). Many of these patriots died in this cause, but their heroics ultimately drove the Syrian forces from the country.

On another level, these verses could even refer to the New Testament Church, with their references to mighty works, persecution and apostasy.

Indeed, at this point Daniel's prophecy definitely takes on a different tone, referring explicitly to "the time of the end" near the end of verse 35. To quote *Expositor's*: "With the conclusion of the preceding pericope [extract] at v. 35, the predictive material that incontestably applies to the Hellenistic empires and the contest between the Seleucids and the Jewish patriots ends. This present section (vv. 36-39) contains some features that hardly apply to Antiochus IV, though most of the details could apply to him as well as to his latter-day antitype, 'the beast.'"

"Both liberal and conservative scholars agree that all of chapter 11 up to this point contains strikingly accurate predictions of the whole sweep of events from the reign of Cyrus ... to the unsuccessful effort of Antiochus Epiphanes to stamp out

the Jewish faith” ( *Expositor’s* , p. 143).

From this point forward a little more than a century would pass before the Roman general Pompey would conquer Jerusalem. Much of the Middle East passed to the control of the Roman Empire, and much of its power in turn passed to its eastern leg, the Byzantine Empire, in the following centuries.

But then, as we’ll see in the next chapter, a remarkable new power and religion arose on the scene to dominate the Middle East for centuries—the Islamic Empire.



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