

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF THE BOOK OF DANIEL

PART EIGHT – HOW GOD MAY GIVE ANOTHER HISTORY LESSON

Two years had passed since Daniel's last recorded dream. Belshazzar was still the king. The Jews were still trapped in Babylon. Nothing has changed. The last dream had scanned six hundred years of recognizable history but with a hint of the more distant future at its end.

Now Daniel dreamed again. The scene had shifted from the sea, probably the Mediterranean, out of which came the four beasts, to the Ulai Canal which was probably a river just east of Susa flowing into the Persian Gulf. Susa would be the capital of the new Persian empire which would follow the Babylonian one.(v.1,2)

The dream described the activity of first a ram and then a goat. Later the dream is partly explained. The ram with two horns was the empire of the Medes and Persians which would rapidly cross the Ulai Canal and take over the Babylonian empire before spreading much further west into northern Greece and Egypt, north into Russia, and east into north India. It would last from 539 to 331 BC, in the early part of which time the Jews would be set free to return to their own country. The goat with one horn which was broken and then replaced by four horns was the Greek empire under Alexander the Great which would expand even faster to a similar area before his death and its division a few years later among his four generals. This dream repeats the promise of the silver chest and bronze body and thighs of the statue in chapter 2, and the bear and the leopard of chapter 7.(v.3-8 and 15-22)

Rather than moving on this time to the fourth beast, Rome, the new dream focuses more closely on the events at the end of the Greek era. It describes a ruler who would target Judah and the temple in Jerusalem, offering a blasphemous sacrifice. The part of Alexander's empire based in Syria, the Seleucid empire, controlled Judah. In 175 BC Antiochus IV, known as Epiphanes, killed his brother and seized the throne. Antiochus named himself Zeus Epiphanes, meaning 'Zeus manifested' because he considered himself to be an incarnation of the Greek god Zeus! Behind his back people changed his title to Epimanes, which means 'madman'. He went much further than his predecessors in trying to force the Jews to take on the Greek culture and gods. From 169 BC he forbade them to celebrate the Sabbath, and to circumcise, and he burned copies of the Law of Moses. The dream mentions a period of about 6 years before the temple is restored. In 166 BC he first erected a statue of Zeus in the temple and had a pig sacrificed to Zeus each year. After six years of suffering the desecration of the temple the Jews finally rebelled in 163 BC, set up an independent kingdom and restored the worship of God in their temple. While not spelt out as clearly as the account of the ram and the goat, the last part of the dream strongly suggests this period of Jewish history. The reason for the invader's behaviour was the arrogance of a man who put himself in the place of God. As such this is one of many glimpses,(Matt.24:5,24; II Thess.2:8; I Jn.2:22) of the end of history when such things may happen yet again.(v.9-14 and 23-26)

The first temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. Zerubbabel rebuilt it in 536 BC with the permission of Cyrus the Persian king. This time the temple was defiled and had to be restored. The same thing happened in 63 BC when the Romans conquered Judah. In 20 BC, Herod the Great began rebuilding a much more magnificent temple. The second and final destruction would come in 70 AD. Revelation chapter 11 describes a similar event to Daniel 8 and may well be understood to refer to the Roman action in leveling the temple to the ground in punishment for the Jewish revolt.

Because their relationship with God was centred on worship and sacrifice in the temple these events were huge milestones in Jewish history.

Once again Daniel was devastated by his dream and its terrible significance. Some explanation had been given but he had many unanswered questions. Eventually he was able to get up and go on with his work. The full meaning of God's message to the world can overwhelm us.(v.27)

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY ON DANIEL, CHAPTER EIGHT

1. What new and important information did God give Daniel in chapter 8? How would it help him and His people to handle their present circumstances?
2. Compare what the Jews suffered under Antiochus Epiphanes with other similar difficult times. What does this dream explain about why persecution comes on us as believers?
3. Why was Daniel so shattered by his dream? How is the responsibility of Christian ministry so emotionally moving at times? How can we cope with such experiences?