

The Times of the Gentiles

“Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.”
—*Luke 21:24*

JESUS’ PROPHECY CONCERNING the treading down of Jerusalem was part of his answer to the disciples’ question, “When then will these things be?” Additionally, they asked, “What will be the sign

of thy presence, and of the consummation of the age?” (Luke 21:7; Matt. 24:3, *The Emphatic Diaglott*) Jesus’ answer to these questions implies that the time when Jerusalem would no longer be “trodden down” by the Gentiles was to be at the end of the age, a period identified by Jesus as the “harvest” earlier in his ministry. (Matt. 13:39) Further implied is that the invisible return and resulting second presence of the Messiah would be a reality when the “times of the Gentiles” came to an end.

In this prophecy, the city of Jerusalem is used by Jesus as a symbol of the nation of Israel. Jerusalem was the capital city of Israel, and would, therefore, properly stand for the nation. Toward the close of Jesus’ ministry he said to the religious rulers of Israel, and through them to the nation, “O Jerusalem,

Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”—Matt. 23:37,38

Jesus’ expression, “trodden down,” is evidently a reference to the fact that Israel at the time of his First Advent was not a free nation, and had not been for hundreds of years. The nation had lost its national independence six centuries earlier when its last king, Zedekiah, was overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar and the people taken captive to Babylon. Seventy years after this, under a decree issued by King Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire, the people were permitted to return to their land, but they were still subject to Gentile authority.—II Chron. 36:11-21; Ezra 1:1-3

The Medo-Persian Empire later gave way to the rising power of the Greeks, and the Grecian Empire, in turn, eventually came under the domination of the Romans. Throughout this entire period, Israel was subject to each of these Gentile powers, being “trodden down” to a greater or lesser degree, and at the time of Jesus’s earthly ministry was under the rule of the Roman Empire. In his prophecy Jesus took note of this, and foretold that Israel’s experience of the previous six centuries would continue until the end of “the times of the Gentiles.”

A MEASURED TIME

The Greek word translated “times” in our opening text denotes a “measure of time,” also a “fixed and definite time.” (*Thayer’s Greek Definitions*)

Various statements of Scripture, as well as specific, defining events in recorded history, mark for us, we believe, the beginning and the end of this period in Israel's history.

The Scriptures further indicate that this was to be a period of national punishment upon Israel due to their disobedience to God, and would entail their loss of national independence. Through Moses, God had entered into a covenant with Israel in which he promised to protect and bless the nation commensurate with their fidelity to him. The people were warned by God of the disciplinary punishments which would come upon them if disobedient. Furthermore, in the event that they did not learn their lesson from these, and continued in their wayward course, a more drastic and long-lasting punishment was prophesied.

We quote from Leviticus 26:12,14,16-18: "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people. ... But if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments; ... ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; ... And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins."

These words of God given to Israel through Moses were stated with a degree of finality which makes it apparent that the "seven times more" was to be a lengthy punishment upon Israel that would come upon the nation because their sins had come to the full. It was to this situation that the Prophet Ezekiel evidently referred centuries later when he said to

Israel's last king, Zedekiah, "And thou, profane wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come, when iniquity shall have an end, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Remove the diadem, and take off the crown: this shall not be the same: exalt him that is low, and abase him that is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn, it: and it shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it him."—Ezek. 21:25-27

It was the kingdom arrangement of Israel which came to an end with the overthrow of Zedekiah. It then ceased to function. It was overthrown until, as the Prophet Ezekiel stated, "he come whose right it is," to whom God would "give" his kingdom. This, we believe, is a reference to Christ. Since it was with Zedekiah's overthrow that Israel's long and final period of punishment began, it also signaled the beginning of the time during which "Jerusalem" would be trodden down by the Gentiles.

FURTHER CONFIRMATION

It was Nebuchadnezzar and his armies that overthrew Israel's last king, Zedekiah, and took the people to Babylon. Among these captives was Daniel who, while serving in the Babylonian government, became one of the outstanding holy prophets of God. Daniel was used by the Lord to focus attention on the great development which occurred in the divine purpose and plan when King Zedekiah of Israel was overthrown. In God's providence, this is brought to light in connection with a dream given to Nebuchadnezzar, and recorded in Daniel 2:28-45. When the king awoke from his sleep he was troubled by his dream and sought the help of "the magicians, and the astrologers, and

the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans,” to recall his dream and also to give its interpretation. (Dan. 2:1,2) None could give him any help, and it was then arranged that Daniel should be given an opportunity to try.

With the Lord’s help Daniel was able to relate the king’s dream to him, together with its interpretation. Daniel said that in the dream Nebuchadnezzar saw a great human-like image having a head of gold, breast and arms of silver, trunk and thighs of brass, and legs of iron. The feet and toes of this image were made of iron and clay. In his dream the king then saw a stone cut out of a mountain without hands, which smote the image on its feet. The image fell, was ground to powder and then blown away. The dream concluded with the king seeing the stone, which had smote the image, grow until it became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.—Dan. 2:31-35

In his interpretation of the dream Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar, “Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold.”—vss. 37,38

Here is a remarkable statement. It indicates that now, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar, would be a period during which God would exercise his will in the affairs of men through Gentile rulers rather than the kingdom of Israel, which Nebuchadnezzar himself had overthrown. Daniel explained further that the kingdom of Babylon would have successors, three

in number, as represented by the silver, brass, and iron of the image. These are easily identified historically as Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Confirming that this was part of God's arrangement, it was in the days of the Roman Empire that Paul wrote, "The powers that be are ordained of God."—Rom. 13:1

Let us not conclude from this, however, that God blessed the rulerships of these successive empires, or that he sanctioned everything they did. It is simply that throughout the centuries God permitted them to maintain a semblance of law and order in that part of the world in which he was accomplishing various purposes, often "behind the scenes," so to speak. These purposes related to the grand future time when eventually the one would come "whose right it is," and to whom God would give his kingdom, to be established forever upon the Earth.—Matt. 6:10

THE INTERPRETATION

Gentile nations had existed from the dawn of history. Powerful among these were Egypt, Assyria, Syria and Babylon. Under Nebuchadnezzar Babylon had become supreme, conquering that last island of resistance, which was Israel. Even so, the Medes and Persians were threatening, and finally overthrew Babylon. It is clear, then, that the image Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream did not represent the mere fact that Gentile nations were now to exist, for this would have been no special change in the status of the world's governments.

Much more than this was involved in the symbol of Nebuchadnezzar's image, as Daniel reveals in his interpretation. "The God of heaven hath given thee a

kingdom,” Daniel said to the king, and added, “Thou art this head of gold.” (vss. 37,38) This was a new development. God’s kingdom of Israel was overthrown, including their last king, Zedekiah, and now he had given dominion to a Gentile ruler. Here again is indicated the beginning of the “times of the Gentiles.”

Doubtless the Gentile nations generally knew of the dangers involved in attacking Israel, but now the king of Babylon had overthrown Israel’s ruler, and taken the people captive. Instead of Nebuchadnezzar being punished for this, or even destroyed, the God of Israel had said through one of his own prophets, “The God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom. ... Thou art this head of gold.”

Not long after this Nebuchadnezzar said, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30) For this show of pride God removed the kingdom temporarily from Nebuchadnezzar. The record reads, “While the word was in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, saying, O king Nebuchadnezzar, to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee. And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field: they shall make thee to eat grass as oxen, and seven times shall pass over thee, until thou know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.”—vss. 31,32

When the king had been properly humbled his reason returned, and he extolled the God of heaven, and, as he said, “Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk

in pride he is able to abase.” (vss. 34-37) This experience served to further impress Nebuchadnezzar with the fact that Israel’s God, the “King of heaven,” was taking notice of his behavior, and teaching him lessons when it was necessary to do so. This, in turn, would more firmly convince him that the God which Daniel worshipped had indeed given him a kingdom.

The Prophet Daniel became highly placed in the government of Babylon, and when it was overthrown he maintained his exalted position under the Medo-Persian rulers. Under these circumstances it would seem highly probable that some of these Gentile kings would be impressed with the fact that Israel’s God was in some manner overruling in their affairs. Cyrus, in fact, announced, “The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem.”—Ezra 1:2

How true, then, was Daniel’s prophecy to Nebuchadnezzar, “After thee shall arise another kingdom,” to whom the same statement would apply, “The God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom.” (Dan. 2:39,37) The Bible does not fill in the record of the four centuries just prior to the First Advent of Jesus. However, during that time the Greeks gained power and overthrew the Medo-Persian Empire, and then came the powerful Roman Empire, to which Israel was subject when Jesus came.

Thus we have the succession of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, as pictured by the gold, silver, brass and iron of the image which Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. Secular history likewise confirms the existence of these four major empires during the last six centuries before Christ. The intent

of Daniel's prophecy is that the same fact would apply to all these—namely, that the God of heaven would give them a kingdom. Indeed, as we have noted, Paul wrote that Rome, the “powers that be” in his day, had been ordered by God.

The symbol of Nebuchadnezzar's image did not end fully with the legs of iron. There were also the feet and toes mixed of iron and clay. This pictures a weakening and dividing of the power of the Roman Empire, which we also know to be historically exactly what happened. The iron-like strength of civil authority was gradually diminished by the mixing of it with ecclesiastical power, aptly represented by clay. We should expect that this concept of government, a mixture of civil and religious authority, would with the passing of centuries, become grossly distorted, and it did. It was this ideology that eventually was much hailed in Europe as the “divine right of kings.”

Thus, briefly, we have traced the “times of the Gentiles” down through the centuries. Now it is but proper to ask as to when this long, but “measured” period, would end. Although we can deduce from various Scriptures a specific calculation of its length, for our present consideration we will confine our discussion to evidence provided by historical world events since the early part of the twentieth century which point, we believe, to the end of this period described by Jesus in our opening text.

As we have seen, the period during which Jerusalem would be “trodden down” was designed by God as a time of punishment upon Israel, during which they would be ruled by Gentile kingdoms and empires. Additionally, we know that the year 1914 was one of the major turning points of history. Let us

examine what occurred then, and since, pertaining to and associated with the “times of the Gentiles,” and with the nation of Israel.

NATION REBORN

First let us recall the words of our text, “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” If the year 1914 is associated with the end of the “times of the Gentiles,” we should see some evidence of a changed status of the Jewish people at that time, and since. History confirms this to be the case. Here it is important to point out that the precise “end” of this period would merely signal the beginning of changes and events which then take place, not the completion of those events. Thus, we should not expect too much to occur in the one year of 1914.

The First World War began in 1914. It was a destructive and devastating war, but out of that struggle came a change of attitude on the part of some of the great powers toward the Jewish people. There was the Balfour Declaration issued in November 1917, later implemented by the League of Nations, declaring the right of the Jewish people to build a national home for themselves in Palestine, the land that was promised to their forefathers by God.

So far as human wisdom can determine, it would appear that had it not been for the First World War and certain world conditions associated therewith, the official declaration of the right of the Jewish people to a homeland would never have been made. The Jewish people were quick to follow up and take advantage of these changed conditions, although many difficulties arose, some of which have not yet been overcome.

Subsequent to the First World War, it seems that Great Britain made agreements with some of the other nations in the region of Palestine which were in conflict with commitments they had made to the Jewish people. This eventually led to the issuance of the infamous British White Paper in 1939 severely limiting the right of Jews to purchase land in Palestine. Soon after came the atrocity of the Jewish Holocaust under the fascist rule of Nazi Germany and Hitler during World War II.

In the aftermath of this second world conflict, it became of great importance for Jews who survived the Holocaust that they seek refuge in another land. Naturally, their hearts turned again toward Palestine. The situation became more tense as underground warfare increased between returning Jews and surrounding Arabs. Finally, the British withdrew their army of protection from Palestine, and soon the Arabs were defeated by the Israelites. On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel, and the nation was re-born. In quick succession one after another of the great powers recognized Israel, and in due course it became a member of the United Nations.

While there were many years of controversy and conflict involved, it was the First World War, beginning in 1914, which set up the circumstances, put the wheels in motion, and finally led to the establishment of Israel once more as an independent state, no longer subject to other nations. To be sure, Israel is a small nation and does not yet possess all the land promised in the Bible. It is also true that Israel has engaged in many wars and conflicts since 1948 in order to maintain her status as a nation. She has

struggled to improve her position, even as other nations have done. Some seventy-three years later, however, and more than a century after World War I, it is clearly evident that Israel is no longer “trodden down” by the Gentiles.

Thus, when we recognize that Jesus, in his prophecy pertaining to Jerusalem and the “times of the Gentiles,” was not referring to the buildings and walls of the city, but to the nation symbolized by that ancient capital, it becomes evident that the “times of the Gentiles” are now fulfilled. That fulfillment, we believe, was in 1914, as evidenced by the many subsequent events summarized in the foregoing paragraphs.

DIVINE RIGHT OF KINGS ENDED

We have already noted that the division of the old Roman Empire was pictured by a mixture of iron and clay which Nebuchadnezzar saw in the feet and toes of the image. These, we believe, represented the powerful monarchies of Europe which had existed for many centuries and were still the dominant powers in the world at the outbreak of the First World War. They were controlled by hereditary ruling houses, the offshoots or “toes,” of the old Roman Empire. These monarchies asserted that God had authorized them to rule, claiming the theory of the “divine right of kings.”

If, however, the “times of the Gentiles” ended in 1914, together with the further events resulting from the First World War, we should expect to see changes in this old Roman Empire setup, and certainly we do. No one today thinks of any country in Europe as a segment of the Roman Empire. The “divine right of kings” concept of government no longer exists,

nor is anyone recommending a return to this form of rule as a solution to the world's problems.

The prophecy states that when the stone smote the image, the gold, silver, brass, and iron were broken to pieces "together." (Dan. 2:35) The four empires involved in this prophecy, however, each fell separately at different times, not together. In fact, the relatively small remnants of many of these nations still exist today, but they are no longer viewed as a "great image," such as Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. That these empires would fall "together" suggests that there would be something common to all of them which would continue throughout the entire "times of the Gentiles," and not be destroyed until the "stone" smote the image on its feet. This commonality was the decree, "The God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom." That mandate, fulfilled successively by Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, has now ended.

This in turn would mean, Daniel explains, that, "In the days of these kings [represented by the toes of the image] shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever." (Dan. 2:44) This indicates that regardless of the ebb and flow of present world conditions, in which peace is promised today and war threatened tomorrow, the meaning of all the chaotic years since 1914 is that the God of heaven is setting aside human rulership in preparation for the manifestation of the kingdom of the Messiah. It is that kingdom only which eventually will establish God's will in the Earth, even as it is now in heaven. For that kingdom, let us continue to pray!—Matt. 6:10 ■