**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**DANIEL-002. THE IMAGE AND THE STONE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"36. This is the dream; and we will tell the interpretation thereof before the king. 37. Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. 38. 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. 39. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth. 40. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. 41. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. 42. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. 43. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay. 44. And in the days of these kings 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. 45. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure. 46. Then the king Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face, and worshipped Daniel, and commanded that they should offer an oblation and sweet odours unto him. 47. The king answered unto Daniel, and said, Of a truth it is, that your God is a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, seeing thou couldest reveal this secret. 48. Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon. 49. Then Daniel requested of the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, over the affairs of the province of Babylon: but Daniel sat in the gate of the king."*

*Daniel 2:36-49*

The colossal image, seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream, was a reproduction of those which met his waking eyes, and still remain for our wonder in our museums. The mingled materials are paralleled in ancient art. The substance of the dream is no less natural than its form. The one is suggested by familiar sights; the other, by pressing anxieties. What more likely than that, in the second year of his reign (v. 1), waking thoughts of the future of his monarchy should trouble the warrior-king, scarcely yet firm on his throne, and should repeat themselves in nightly visions? God spoke through the dream, and He is not wont to answer questions before they are asked, nor to give revelations to men on points which they have not sought to solve. We may be sure that Nebuchadnezzar's dream met his need.

The unreasonable demand that the Chaldeans should show the dream as well as interpret it, fits the character of the king, as an imperious despot, intolerant of obstacles to his will, and holding human life very cheap. Daniel's knowledge of the dream and of its meaning is given to him in a vision by night, which is the method of divine illumination throughout the book, and may be regarded as a lower stage thereof than the communications to prophets of the word of the Lord.

The passage falls into two parts: the image and the stone.

**I. The Image.**

It was a human form of strangely mingled materials, of giant size no doubt, and of majestic aspect. Barbarous enough it would have looked beside the marble lovelinesses of Greece, but it was quite like the coarser art which sought for impressiveness through size and costliness. Other people than Babylonian sculptors think that bigness is greatness, and dearness preciousness.

This image embodied what is now called a philosophy of history. It set forth the fruitful idea of a succession and unity in the rise and fall of conquerors and kingdoms. The four empires represented by it are diverse, and yet parts of a whole, and each following on the other. So the truth is taught that history is an organic whole, however unrelated its events may appear to a superficial eye. The writer of this book had learned lessons far in advance of his age, and not yet fully grasped by many so-called historians.

But, further, the human figure of the image sets forth all these kingdoms as being purely the work of men. Not that the overruling divine providence is ignored, but that the play of human passions, the lust of conquest and the like, and the use of human means, such as armies, are emphasised.

Again, the kingdoms are seen in their brilliancy, as they would naturally appear to the thoughts of a conqueror, whose highest notion of glory was earthly dominion, and who was indifferent to the suffering and blood through which he waded to a throne. When the same kingdoms are shown to Daniel in chapter vii. they are represented by beasts. Their cruelty and the destruction of life which they caused were uppermost in a prophet's view; their vulgar splendour dazzled a king's sleeping eyes, because it had intoxicated his waking thoughts. Much worldly glory and many of its aims appear as precious metal to dreamers, but are seen by an illuminated sight to be bestial and destructive.

Once more there is a steady process of deterioration in the four kingdoms. Gold is followed by silver, and that by brass, and that by the strange combination of iron and clay. This may simply refer to the diminution of worldly glory, but it may also mean deterioration, morally and otherwise. Is it not the teaching of Scripture that, unless God interpose, society will steadily slide downwards? And has not the fact been so, wherever the brake and lever of revelation have not arrested the decline and effected elevation? We are told nowadays of evolution, as if the progress of humanity were upwards; but if you withdraw the influence of supernatural revelation, the evidence of power in manhood to work itself clear of limitations and lower forms is very ambiguous at the best--in reference to morals, at all events. Evil is capable of development, as well as good; and perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's colossus is a truer representation of the course of humanity than the dreams of modern thinkers who see manhood becoming steadily better by its own effort, and think that the clay and iron have inherent power to pass into fine gold.

The question of the identification of these successive monarchies does not fall to be discussed here. But I may observe that the definite statement of verse 44 (in the days of these kings) seems to date the rise of the everlasting kingdom of God in the period of the last of the four, and therefore that the old interpretation of the fourth kingdom as the Roman seems the most natural. The force of that remark may, no doubt, be weakened by the consideration that the Old Testament prophets perspective of the future brought the coming of Messiah into immediate juxtaposition with the limits of their own vision; but still it has force.

The allocation of each part of the symbol is of less importance for us than the lessons to be drawn from it as a whole. But the singular amalgam of iron and clay in the fourth kingdom is worth notice. No sculptor or metallurgist could make a strong unity out of such materials, of which the combination could only be apparent and superficial. The fact to which it points is the artificial unity into which the great conquering empires of old crushed their unfortunate subject peoples, who were hammered, not fused, together. They shall mingle themselves with the seed of men (ver. 43), may either refer to the attempts to bring about unity by marriages among different races, or to other vain efforts to the same end. To obliterate nationalities has always been the conquering despot's effort, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Czar of Russia, and it always fails. This is the weakness of these huge empires of antiquity, which have no internal cohesion, and tumble to pieces as soon as some external bond is loosened. There is only one kingdom which has no disintegrating forces lodged in it, because it unites men individually to its king, and so binds them to one another; and that is the kingdom which Nebuchadnezzar saw in its destructive aspect.

**II. So we have now to think of the stone cut out without hands.**

Three things are specified with regard to it: its origin, its duration, and its destructive energy. The origin is heavenly, in sharp contrast to the human origin of the kingdoms symbolised in the colossal man. That idea is twice expressed: once in plain words, the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom; and once figuratively as being cut out of the mountain without hands. By the mountain we are probably to understand Zion, from which, according to many a prophecy, the Messiah King was to rule the earth (Ps. 2.; Isa. 2:3).

The fulfilment of this prediction is found, not only in the supernatural birth of Jesus Christ, but in the spread of the gospel without any of the weapons and aids of human power. Twelve poor men spoke, and the world was shaken and the kingdoms remoulded. The seer had learned the omnipotence of ideas and the weakness of outward force. A thought from God is stronger than all armies, and outconquers conquerors. By the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, by the power of weakness in the preachers of the Cross, by the energies of the transforming Spirit, the God of heaven has set up the kingdom. It shall never be destroyed. Its divine origin guarantees its perpetual duration. The kingdoms of man's founding, whether they be in the realm of thought or of outward dominion, have their day, and cease to be, but the kingdom of Christ lasts as long as the eternal life of its King. He cannot die any more, and He cannot live discrowned. Other forms of human association perish, as new conditions come into play which antiquate them; but the kingdom of Jesus is as flexible as it is firm, and has power to adapt to itself all conditions in which men can live. It will outlast earth, it will fill eternity; for when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to His Father, the kingdom, which the God of heaven set up, will still continue.

It shall not be left to other people. By that, seems to be meant that this kingdom will not be like those of human origin, in which dominion passes from one race to another, but that Israel shall ever be the happy subjects and the dominant race. We must interpret the words of the spiritual Israel, and remember how to be Christ's subject is to belong to a nation who are kings and priests.

The destructive power is graphically represented. The stone, detached from the mountain, and apparently self-moved, dashes against the heterogeneous mass of iron and clay on which the colossus insecurely stands, and down it comes with a crash, breaking into a thousand fragments as it falls. Like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors (Daniel 2:35) is the débris, which is whirled out of sight by the wind. Christ and His kingdom have reshaped the world. These ancient, hideous kingdoms of blood and misery are impossible now. Christ and His gospel shattered the Roman empire, and cast Europe into another mould. They have destructive work to do yet, and as surely as the sun rises daily, will do it. The things that can be shaken will be shaken till they fall, and human society will never obtain its stable form till it is moulded throughout after the pattern of the kingdom of Christ.

The vision of our passage has no reference to the quickening power of the kingdom; but the best way in which it destroys is by transformation. It slays the old and lower forms of society by substituting the purer which flow from possession of the one Spirit. That highest glory of the work of Christ is but partially represented here, but there is a hint in Daniel 2:35, which tells that the stone has a strange vitality, and can grow, and does grow, till it becomes an earth-filling mountain.

That issue is not reached yet; but the dream is certain. The kingdom is concentrated in its King, and the life of Jesus, diffused through His servants, works to the increase of the empire, and will not cease till the kingdoms of the world are the kingdoms of our God and of His Christ. That stone has vital power, and if we build on it we receive, by wonderful impartation, a kindred derived life, and become living stones. It is laid for a sure foundation. If a man stumble over it while it lies there to be built upon, he will lame and maim himself. But it will one day have motion given to it, and, falling from the height of heaven, when He comes to judge the world which He rules and has redeemed, it will grind to powder all who reject the rule of the everlasting King of men.