

Revelation 17 in its Context

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Background

Three chapters of Revelation use the expression “seven heads and ten horns” (Rev 12, 17) or “ten horns and seven heads” (Rev 13). In this paper I explore parallels among these prophecies and also relate them back to Dan 2, 7, 8, and 11. It is important that we start our investigation in Daniel.

There are two points in particular that we need to understand about the empires of Daniel. One is that the four empires portray five phases of power. The other point is that the second time we see the fourth empire its strength is temporarily removed. It is strong, then weak, then strong again.

Five phases of power

Dan 2 and 7. The expression “seven heads and ten horns” can be derived in two ways. The first of these involves some simple math: In Dan 7 there are four beasts. The first has one head, the second has one head, the third has four heads, and the fourth has one head ($1+1+4+1 = 7$ heads). Also, the first beast has no horns, the second beast has no horns, the third beast has no horns, but the fourth beast has ten horns ($0+0+0+10 = 10$ horns).

In Dan 2 there is iron and iron mixed with clay. In Dan 7 there is the terrible nondescript beast and a little horn. Thus, in both cases the last empire takes two forms.

Dan 8 and 11. One difference between the first two major prophecies of Daniel and the last two is that Dan 2 and 7 refer to Babylon, while Dan 8 and 11 do not. A similarity is that all four prophecies portray the last empire in two forms.

In Dan 8 there is a difference between the little horn of vs. 9 and the little horn of vss. 10-12. The little horn in vs. 9 is oriented horizontally and “grew exceedingly great toward the south, toward the east, and toward the glorious land.” What these directions mean depends on where we start. I suggest starting from Italy where Rome is located. South from Italy is Egypt and east from Italy is Syria. Dan 8 is a preview of Dan 11, except that the two chapters take different starting points. In Dan 11 we do not start from Italy but from Judea. South from Judea is again Egypt and North from Judea is again Syria.

After Alexander the Great’s death his empire was divided up among his generals. Alexander’s life marks the beginning of the Hellenistic period. When it says “at the latter

end of their kingdom, when the transgressors have reached their limit, a king of bold face, one who understands riddles, shall arise” (Dan 8:22-23), that is the end of the Hellenistic period.

This fact has caused some confusion because both Antiochus and Rome arise then. Historically one could justify talking about either one. Here we deal with Rome, because that provides for a parallel with Dan 2, whereas Antiochus does not. Antiochus was just another Greek. Rome overwhelmed first Egypt and then Syria. Both countries were eventually added to the Empire and ceased to exist as independent political entities.

In Dan 8:10-12 the little horn is portrayed differently. Here the little horn is oriented not horizontally but vertically, capturing the fact that it would eventually assert itself against God. This is another test case for the Antiochus hypothesis, because in Dan 11:38 it says, “A god whom his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts.” Antiochus was devoted to the Greek gods of those who preceded him, but the papacy did not honor the gods of the Roman emperors.

The text also says, “His power shall be great—but not by his own power” (Dan 8:24). The papacy drew political support from “the kings of the earth” as it says in Rev 17:2a. This is what “sexual immorality” means in Rev 17:2b. The papacy’s strength was not by its own power.

Saying that the little horn would eventually “destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints” (Dan 8:24) is parallel to the fifth seal (Rev 6:9-11).

As regards secular Rome, the plaque that Pontius Pilate hung on the cross said: “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (Matt 27:37); or, “The King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26); or, “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38); or, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). Whatever the wording may have been, this is not the same as saying “astonishing things against the God of gods” (Dan 11:36).

The “astonishing things” referred to there were theological claims that would be made later. In spiritual Rome we are no longer talking about the secular Roman Empire. Both forms of Rome are necessary in order for Dan 8 to be parallel with Dan 2, because whereas Antiochus points our attention to the Hellenistic period – and if he is our focus everything stops there – Dan 2 does not. It continues on all the way to the second coming.

We have seen secular Rome, or Rome IVa, in Dan 2 as iron, in Dan 7 as a terrible nondescript beast, in Dan 8 as the little horn of vs. 9 attacking first Egypt and then Syria with Judea in the middle, and in Dan 11 in vss. 16-22, although for narrative reasons the sequence of its activity there is reversed. In Dan 11 its relationship with Syria and Judea is narrated first in vss. 16-22 and then its relationship with Egypt in vss. 25-28. That is Rome IVa.

All of this is to be contrasted with spiritual Rome, or Rome IVb, which we see in Dan 2 as iron mixed with clay, in Dan 7 as the little horn, in Dan 8 as a second phase of the little horn speaking against God in vss. 10-12, and in Dan 11 as a second phase of Rome speaking proud words against God and oppressing His people in vss. 29-45.

These two phases of Rome must be both included and distinguished. Later we will show that the activity of this second phase of Rome is further subdivided in Dan 11:29-39, 40-43, and 44-45. See Table 1.

Table 1
Parallels Illustrating the Fifth Phase of Power

	Dan 2	Dan 7	Dan 8	Dan 11
Rome IVa	Iron 2:33a	Beast 7:7	Horn of 8:9	11:16-28
Rome IVb	Iron/clay 2:33b	Horn 7:8	Horn of 10-12	11:29-39, 40-43, 44-45

The strength of the fifth power is interrupted

I submit that if Rome appears twice in Daniel, as shown above, the resulting five phases of power can be mapped systematically onto the seven phases of power in Rev 17. There is a question how to map five things onto seven things. The answer becomes clear when we map them also onto time. Spiritual Rome's activity takes different forms at different times. For an extended period spiritual Rome's strength remains unchallenged, it is then removed temporarily, and the little horn, or king of the North, or sixth head eventually recovers from its brief period of weakness and becomes strong again. During its initial period of strength it is head #5, while weak it is head #6, and after healing it is head #7.

We don't know how long the wound lasts, but the root meaning of the word *yitnaggah* in Dan 11:40 is "to gore." If the king of the North is gored on this occasion that would explain why his opponent has time to leave before there can be any response. This is why the king spends time marching through "countries" in 11:41. He is trying to find the one who attacked him. This demonstrates that the attacker had time to get away.

Rev 13 relates a similar sequence. "One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast" (13:3). The sea beast is strong before being wounded, it is wounded, and after recovering it is strong again. This is a chiasmic sequence (ABA'). In Rev 17 this same series of events corresponds to heads #5, #6, and #7.

Summary

Daniel describes a series of four main powers: 1=Babylon, 2=Medo-Persia, 3=Greece, and 4=Rome as a secular power. But Rome appears twice. When it appears the second time Rome is a spiritual power: In this case power 5a=Rome as a spiritual power while it is strong, 5b=Rome after it becomes weak, and 5c=Rome after it becomes strong again. Four plus three equals seven.

Interpretation

When Berthier's French Army forcibly removed Pius VI from Rome in 1798 many thought the papacy had come to an end.¹ Actually, it had only suffered a "mortal wound" (Rev 13:3). And the wound would heal.

The papacy is still recovering from what it suffered in 1798. The recovery began slowly. In 1938, 140 years after Berthier, Al Smith ran against Herbert Hoover for president of the United States. He lost badly. The next year the state of Italy gave Vatican City back to the papacy. That was 1929. Since then a number of popes have addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations (Paul VI [1965], John Paul II [1979, 1995], Benedict XVI [2008], and Francis I [2015]). Francis I was voted Person of the Year by Time magazine in 2013 and later he addressed a joint session of congress in 2015. Three popes have received the US Presidential Medal of Freedom (John XXIII [1963], John Paul II [2004], and Francis I "with Distinction" [2025]). This last award was given by the country's second Roman Catholic president, Joe Biden (2021-2025). The first was John F. Kennedy (1961-1963). The current vice-president (J.D. Vance) is Catholic; the current pope (Leo XIV) is American.

The healing process continues and will not be complete until the papacy recovers the ability to persecute. It might make us uncomfortable to say this but we can't neglect saying it because this is something Dan 11:44-45 lays under heavy emphasis. Without the return of persecution there is no seventh head, heads #5 and #7 are no longer a matched pair, Dan 11:44-45 has no potential fulfillment, and the parallels we have been noticing above take us nowhere.

¹ Something like this happens four times in Dan 11:40-45. (a) In 11:40 there is no way whatever that Pius IV an old man could resist a French army in 1798 when Berthier removed him from Rome. (b) In 11:42-43 the fallen world has no defense against the king of the North, because it does not see him as an enemy and does not understand that an attack is taking place. (c) In 11:44 the people of God have no human defense whatever when every part of human society turns against them globally at the end. (d) And in 11:44/12:1 there is no possible way that Satan can mount any form of resistance when Christ comes in power and glory with all the holy angels at the second coming. He is completely defeated.

Comments

The "is" and "is not" statements

What explains the "is" and "is not" statements in Rev 17 is the fact that there are two different beasts in Rev 13. One represents the papacy (sea beast), the other represents the United States (earth beast). While the one "is not" the other "is." The events of Rev 13a and 13b happen at roughly the same time, which explains why one period could be described two ways, as both being and not being.

The woman

Another thing we learn by comparing Rev 12 and 17 is that the woman John sees in both chapters is the same individual, although seen at different times. The first time John sees her is before the 1260 days have started. The text says, "she is to be nourished for 1,260 days" (12:6). The words "is to be" imply that this time of nourishing is still to take place. It has not started yet.

And I suggest that the second time he sees her is after the 1260 days have ended. Here there is no direct reference to a time period, but we find important chronological clues. The statement "five of whom have fallen" in Rev 17:10 have a direct connection with the words "the time of the end" in Dan 11:40 when the mortal wound was inflicted. And that occurs in 1798 at the end of the 1260 days. So John sees the woman both before and after the 1260 days. Any changes the woman undergoes must take place after 538 and before 1798.

I don't mean to imply that the church before the 1260 days began was in every way perfect. There were also people in it like Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Or that the church after the 1260 days ended was in every way corrupt. There were also men in it like William Miller – not to mention Ellen White. But the symbol of a woman seen before and after the 1260 days captures the important point that dramatic changes would occur during that period.

The "eighth"

The word "eighth" mentioned in Rev 17:11 is not an eighth head. The word "head" is specifically omitted from the text at this point. At the same time "eighth" is not merely a different way of saying "beast." Instead, it is a separate power parallel to and contemporaneous with the beast. The entire beast. It "belongs to the seven," i.e., to all seven of the beast's heads, which implies a considerable passage of time. Another term for this entity is "that ancient serpent" (Rev 12:12). The "dragon" in Rev 12 and the "eighth" in Rev 17 are both references to the devil or Satan.

Conclusion

The four empires symbolized in Daniel represent five phases of power, because Rome has two careers. The first of these lasts 360 years from 31 BC when Rome first becomes an Empire to AD 330 when Constantine moves his government eastward to Constantinople. After he does that what had been the Roman Empire becomes Byzantium and what had been the western part of the Roman Empire becomes the various states of Western Europe, or Christendom.

Applying the words “but only for a time” in Dan 11:24 prophetically is important because 360 contrasts nicely with 1260 – the longer period is three and a half times as long as the shorter one – and this contrast marks a shift of emphasis in Dan 11 from Rome as an Empire (power #4) to Rome as a city (power #5).

In Rev 17 the fifth head is spiritual Rome before 1798. The sixth head is spiritual Rome from then to whenever it fully recovers. The seventh head is the papacy after it has fully recovered from its “mortal wound.” In Dan 11:44-45 this is described as a time of trouble.² In Rev 17 it is the period of the seventh head.

Rev 17 is not difficult if we will place each part of it in the context Scripture provides. God is not trying to confuse us. Each thing He says in Rev 17 is explained elsewhere. This is why it is so important that we study Rev 12, 13, and 17 together with Dan 2, 7, 8, and 11. It is rarely the case that we will understand Revelation without studying it in the context of Daniel. See Table 2.

Table 2
World Empires in Daniel and Revelation

Dan 7	Empires			Dan 11	Rev 13	Rev 17
Dan 7:4	Babylon	I	1	-		1
Dan 7:5	Medo-Persia	II	2	Dan 11:2b		2
Dan 7:6	Greece	III	3	Dan 11:2b-15		3
Dan 7:7	Rome (secular)	IVa	4	Dan 11:16-28		4
Dan 7:8	Rome (spiritual)	IVb	5	Dan 11:29-39	Strong	5
				Dan 11:40-43	Weak	6
				Dan 11:44-45	Strong	7

² It is not accidental that Ellen White begins chap. 39 of *Great Controversy* entitled “The Time of Trouble” by quoting Dan 12:1. Dan 11:44-45 (“The Time of Trouble”) and 12:1 (Michael standing up) are a matched pair. The one passage takes place here on earth (11:44-45), the other in heaven (12:1), and both at the same time. This is the third example of recapitulation in Dan 11, all having some bearing on Rome.