Jerome, Commentary on Daniel II.40

The feebleness of the once powerful Romans due to their use of barbarians in their wars

Name of the author: Jerome
Date: 407 CE
Place: Bethlehem
Language: Latin
Category: Christian
Literary genre: Commentary
Title of work: Commentary on Daniel
Reference: II.40
Source(s) that the text is built upon (explicitly – quotations, references – or implicitly): Daniel 2:40-45
Commentary:
For a general introduction to Jerome, please see the commentary on his Letter 77.3.

Jerome's Commentary on Daniel is regarded by scholars as the most important patristic work based on the original Hebrew text. Jerome cites sixteen different Hebrew interpretations of Daniel in the commentary (see Maria Valdez, Historical Interpretations, p. 157-158). Indeed, as Jay Breverman comments, the exegesis of the final fifteen years of Jerome's life, to which the Commentary on Daniel belongs, is much more detailed and carefully written than his previous work, and shows the author's many years of devoted Bible study (Jerome's Commentary on Daniel, p. 10). Although Jerome had promised the Commentary on Daniel to Paulinus of Nola several years before, it was finally composed in 407 CE, when barbarian invasions were troubling the empire, something which we will see below helped to shape Jerome's worldview (for the dating, see John Kelly, Jerome, p. 298). The commentary is dedicated to Pammachius, a Roman senator who had attended schools of rhetoric with Jerome, and Marcella, Pammachius's cousin from a senatorial family who lived an ascetic life in Rome, and was a frequent recipient of Jerome's letters (on Pammachius, see, for instance Elizabeth Clark, The Origenist Controversy, p. 27-29; on Marcella, Andrew Cain, "Rethinking Jerome's Portraits of Holy Women," p. 52-56; Andrew Cain, The Letters of Jerome, p. 68-98).

The Commentary on Daniel takes a different approach to Jerome's other biblical commentaries on the prophetic books, as he specifically states that he is choosing to limit what he discusses (Preface 81). Therefore, Jerome only deals with what he considers to be particularly pertinent passages, and even then does not quote them in full along with his exegesis. However, he tells us that this format was not well-received by the commentary's readers (see the Preface to book II of his Commentary on Isaiah, written two years later in 409 CE). Jerome drew on various Christian exegetes in both this and his other commentaries, citing specifically in the present work Hippolytus of Rome, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Origen of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Julius Africanus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian of Carthage (Megan Hale Williams, The Monk and the Book, p. 110-112). However, despite the fact that Jerome's sources had based their own interpretations of the Septuagint (LXX), Jerome himself comments on the Hebrew text, which John Kelly suggests was the accepted text of his day, and "substantially the same as our 'Masoretic' text." (Kelly, Jerome, p. 159). Moreover, Jerome also shows knowledge of Aramaic, including numerous discussions in the commentary of Aramaic terms (Daniel King, "Vir Quadrilinguis," p. 216). Porphyry, the Neoplatonist philosopher and critic of Christianity, acts somewhat as an interlocutor within the commentary, which is an important witness to the former's work Against the Christians. Porphyry's work, which was banned by the emperor Constantine, is only known through fragments appearing in the writings of Christian authors, including also Eusebius of Caesarea. In 445 CE, Theodosius II ordered every copy of Porphyry's writing to be burned. Porphyry had attacked the book of Daniel, claiming that the prophet was not, as Christians maintained, a predictor of Christ's birth. In his prologue to the commentary, Jerome acknowledges that others have already addressed these criticisms, and so he does not intend to do so in great detail. Rather, Jerome will answer Porphyry's allegations as and when they become relevant to the discussion, As Ariane Magny recognises, then, the philosopher was a secondary concern to Jerome (Porphyry in Fragments, p. 59).

The commentary is mainly useful for Jerome's understanding of two details of the book of Daniel. The first of these
is the identification of the four empires of Daniel 2, 7, and 8, and the identification of the antichrist with a human being. The second is the interpretation of the 70 weeks in Daniel 9 (Valdez, Historical Interpretations, p. 159). It is the first of these which is pertinent to our discussion here. Jerome mainly follows Josephus’s view of the four empires, particularly in his identification of the fourth with Rome (see Jewish Antiquities X.263; for another Christian interpretation of Rome as the fourth empire in Daniel, see the commentary on Epistle of Barnabas 4.3-5). By way of contextualisation of our extract from Jerome’s comments on Daniel 2, it is helpful to first be aware of his exposition of Daniel 7. The author of Daniel describes in the seventh chapter of the book the four empires with reference to four animals: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and an unidentified beast. In Jerome’s exposition of this text, he states that this presentation makes clear that Rome is the fourth empire, with the lion being Babylon, the bear Persia, and the leopard Macedonia (he goes into detail about the specific traits of these kingdoms, which reflect those of their animal counterparts). Jerome’s exegesis of Daniel 7:7, then, asserts that the unnamed fourth beast, which was terrible, strong, and had teeth of iron which crushed all in its path, is the Roman empire, which occupies the whole world (Jerome contradicts Porphyry here, who asserted that the fourth beast was the divided empire of Alexander). This beast is described with legs and feet which are partly made of iron (ferreus), and partly made of clay/earthenware (fictilis) (a detail that is also very important in our extract above). Jerome comments that it is strange that the prophet did not specifically identify this beast like the others, but states that perhaps this was to make it more fearsome, with no name. So, Rome is more ferocious than any of the kingdoms before it. Jerome actually argues that the Hebrews believe this beast to be the boar spoken of in Psalms 79:15 (LXX; 80:13 in English Bibles). Jerome continues in his exegesis on Daniel 7 to argue that the diversity of the Roman empire, which incorporates numerous different peoples, is reflective of the mix of iron and clay in the fourth beast. However, it is this feature which will ultimately lead to Rome’s destruction, partly because even though Rome had subdued numerous nations under her own name, there were still observable differences between these peoples, and the subdued would eventually rebel. As Valdez argues, Jerome thereby explores the difficult relationships existing among the diverse peoples of the Roman empire, as well as those between them and Rome herself, which came to a head when the barbarians began to invade the empire and instigate its downfall (see Valdez, Historical Interpretations, p. 162).

We can now move to discuss further the present passage offering Jerome’s comments on Daniel 2:40 (although actually his exposition covers verses 40-45): “And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron: just as iron crushes and smashes everything, it shall crush and shatter all these” (NRSV). Jerome emphasises that the fourth empire, which is very clearly Rome, who has divided herself into pieces and conquered all other nations. That the Roman empire is characterised with iron testifies to her strength and ferocity, as discussed above. However, Jerome also alludes here to the fact that in Daniel 2:41, the unidentified beast which signifies the fourth empire has feet and toes made not purely of iron, but also of clay/earthenware (“As you saw the feet and toes partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom...” NRSV). For Jerome, this is representative of the current situation that the Roman empire now finds itself in. Rome, who was once strong (fortis) and sturdy (durus), superior to all those that it had conquered, is now feeble, requiring the assistance of barbarian tribes (barbarus) to assist in both civil and foreign wars. Jerome’s writing here and elsewhere witnesses the threat that barbarians posed to Rome’s stability in the early-fifth century, but also, as in the case of the present passage, the way in which Rome’s strategic incorporation of barbarians into its own army was viewed, at least by this Christian author. In the second half of the fourth century, Rome had begun to recruit fighters from barbarian tribes, with 358 CE seeing the incorporation of the Salian Frank people into the empire after their defeat by the emperor Julian. A few years later in 376, the Goths also settled on the south bank of the Danube, pushed towards Roman territory by the Huns, and were accepted as foederati (allies), but then rebelled a few months after and defeated Rome (this is described by Ammianus Marcellinus, History XXXI) (on the issue of the barbarians within the empire during this period, see, for instance, Thomas Burns, Barbarians Within the Gates, p. 184-186; for further discussion of Roman alliance with barbarians in the fourth century, see the commentary on Ambrose of Milan, Letter LXI.1, 4-6). While seemingly necessary for Rome’s own military strength, then, the barbarisation of the Roman army is for Jerome something that contaminates it (we also find a contempt for the barbarisation of the Roman army in rabbinic sources; see Mireille Hadass-Lebel, Jerusalem Against Rome, p. 235-237). Rather than being represented purely by iron in Daniel’s prophecy, a metal which signified pure strength and ferociously (iron was of course the material of weapons), the beast signifying Rome was weakened by the presence of clay/earthenware. This is of course a base, soft material with far less intimidating implications than iron, and for Jerome shows that Rome has debased her once fearsome reputation by diluting her identity (for other discussions of Roman identity in relation to the presence of non-Roman peoples in the empire and army, see the commentaries on Lucan, The Civil War VII.535-543; Prudentius, Against Symmachus II.583-591, 608-620, which respectively take negative and more positive views).

The issue of barbarians more generally was something which concerned Jerome. This is not surprising, as in
407 CE, the year in which the Commentary on Daniel was composed, Gaul was reeling from a barbarian invasion which had begun at the very end of the previous year with the Battle of Mainz. On the 31st of December 406 CE, Vandals and a coalition of other barbarian tribes crossed the frozen river Rhine. We have no contemporary surviving source explaining precisely what triggered this, and scholars have debated whether it was due to a withdrawal of the Roman power from the northwest of the empire, instability due to the division of the empire into two halves, or perhaps the desire of these tribes to escape the threat posed by the Huns, which drove them into the Roman empire (for a discussion of the theories, see Peter Heather, “Why Did the Barbarian Cross the Rhine?” Heather advocates the latter; Thomas Burns, Rome and the Barbarians, p. 383, states that the reason for the invasion was the refusal of Roman garrisons along the Rhine to give the barbarians food and shelter). In brief, the Franks, who were allies of Rome, fought against the Vandals and their alliance of other barbarian tribes, who were eventually victorious, and were thus able to proceed with an invasion of Gaul. Jerome actually lists various tribes as being responsible in his Letter 123.16 (he names Quadi, Vandals, Sarmatians, Alans, Gepids, Herules, Saxons, Burgundians, Allemanii, and Pannonians; this list is likely not an accurate representation, however: Michael Kulikowski, “Barbarians in Gaul,” p. 326). In addition to barbarising the Roman army, which our passage states demonstrates the feebleness (imbecillus) of the Roman empire during Jerome’s day, the threat from barbarians rebelling against their Roman hosts made them obvious targets for his criticism of the state of the empire, and helped to reinforce his interpretation of the fourth empire in Daniel being that of the Romans.

The latter part of our passage proceeds to argue that after all four of the empires prophesied in the book of Daniel have ceased, a rock (which is identified as Christ) will be brought into the world to supplant them. Jerome concludes by refuting the claim he cites as held by both Porphyry and the Jewish people that rather than Christ, it will be the people of Israel who will emerge victorious after the four kingdoms have fallen. The Jewish people are presented as believing themselves to be stronger than all the great kingdoms prophesied in Daniel, including Rome. In Jerome’s view, however, everything will be submitted to Christ, all realms and powers being under his rulership. Here, his comments are in reference to Daniel 2:44-45, with Christ naturally read in: “And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall this kingdom be left to another people. It shall crush all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever; just as you saw that a stone was cut from the mountain not by hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold” (NRSV). Christ’s is a stone, cut out from a great mountain without the aid of human hands – Christ was born without sexual intercourse, from a virgin (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:1: we have a building from God, a house not made with hands…” NRSV). The heavenly kingdom of Christ, then, supplants the Roman empire, which was made powerful precisely by human hands (its armies etc.) (although, it should be noted here that Christian writers did argue for God having a role in the building and sustaining of Rome). The Roman empire, just like the three great empires before it, is finite in Jerome’s view, and will ultimately lose its dominant position.

Keywords in the original language:

- aes
- aeternus
- argentum
- aurum
- barbarus
- bellum civile
- dominus
- domo
- durus
- ferreus
- ferrum
- fictilis
- fortis
- gens
- imbecillus
- imperium Romanum
- impius
- israel
- ludaeus
● lapis
● natio
● populus
● Porphyrius
● regno
● regnum
● Romanus
● saeculum
● salvator
● universus

Thematic keywords in English:

● barbarians
● bronze
● civil war
● clay
● cycle of empires
● Daniel
● fall of Rome
● fourth empire
● gold
● iron
● Israel
● Jewish people
● Roman army
● Roman domination
● Roman power
● Roman weakness
● silver
● war

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Epistle of Barnabas 4.3-5

The end of the Flavian dynasty?

- Read more about Epistle of Barnabas 4.3-5

Text

Lucan, *The Civil War* VII.535-543

After having described how Caesar’s army inflicted severe damage upon Pompey's, Lucan expresses his wishes about Rome’s future depending on the outcome of Pharsalus’s battle.

- Read more about Lucan, *The Civil War* VII.535-543

Text

Prudentius, *Against Symmachus* II.583-591, 608-620

The divine will behind Rome’s greatness, which wished to unite under one power numerous peoples

- Read more about Prudentius, *Against Symmachus* II.583-591, 608-620

Text

Ambrose of Milan, *Letter* LXI.1, 4-6

Ambrose praises Theodosius’s piety as God’s chosen custodian of the empire after the usurper Eugenius has been defeated

- Read more about Ambrose of Milan, *Letter* LXI.1, 4-6

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