



# Prophecy and History

#### What is Truth?

A strange question perhaps, yet one that expresses both our confusion and our skepticism regarding truth. Confusion, because with a multiplicity of religions and a diversity of beliefs around us we may genuinely wonder, "Where is the truth?" Skepticism, for it suggests that truth does not exist; in fact, there really is no objective truth.

The Hebrew Bible, the *Tanakh*, answers the question clearly. "*Hashem, God is the truth*" (Jeremiah 10:10; literal translation). For the Bible then, truth does exist; truth *is* association with God Himself. In fact, truth, *Emeth*, in the Hebrew language, is one of the 13 attributes of God. It falls seventh in the list in the exact center of the 13 attributes listed in Exodus 34:6; literal translation, a passage that is recited in the liturgies of Rosh Ha-Shanah Yom Kippur (Jewish New Year, Day of Attonement).

If truth is identified with God's character, it does not come from us but is to be found outside of us - in God. This recognition implies that in order to find the truth we should not approach it with the preconceived idea that we know what the truth is. Instead, we should approach the truth with a question, "What is it?" This is the very same question, in fact, the ancient Israelites asked when confronted with the manna, the bread of God in the wilderness. "What is it?" they asked, and the question gave the name to this heavenly bread, for the Hebrew word manna means "What is it?" The meaning of the word *manna* suggests an important lesson regarding how we should approach Biblical truth. We should approach it with the question: "What is it? What is truth?" We should approach it with the same humble and honest mindset as the ancient Israelites approached the manna in the wilderness, asking "What is it? Asking the question from this frame of reference no longer suggests confusion Instead, it implies sincere questioning or skepticism. from one who expects a true answer from above.

#### Copyright© 2003 Shabbat Shalom.

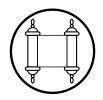
The Shema Israel Bible Correspondence Course is a project of Shabbat Shalom.

Mail: Shabbat Shalom
Andrews University

Berrien Springs, MI 49104-1535

Fax: (269) 471-6202 e-mail: sshalom@andrews.edu

#### Bible Study – Lesson # 13\* Prophecy and History



notes

#### History and Prophecy

hen we think of prophecy we think future. But prophecy should not be understood in terms of Nostradamus, or the fortuneteller but as God's way to reveal Himself. Significantly, when God defined himself to Moses, who wanted to know his name, He said my name is Ehyeh, "I will be." This future sense was also encapsulated in the very name of God, YHWH, which means "He will be" or "He will cause to be." For the Hebrew slave this revelation was full of hope. For, it meant He was not just a God of the museum, or of cultural tradition. Neither is He only the God of the present, the God of a subjective existential experience. He is also and perhaps essentially the God of the future. This affirmation is important because it tells us that history which seems to move blindly and randomly is in fact, followed by the eyes of God. Indeed the course of history has been predicted by the ancient Biblical prophecies, even to the detail. But this information has not been given to excite our curiosity or satisfy our taste for the sensational. It is there as a landmark to assist us in our hope, and strengthen our confidence that God is still there and will have the last word.

<sup>\*</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all scripture verses are taken from the New International Reader's Version of the Bible, Copywrite 1998, by the Zondervan Corporation.

### 1. How did God identify Himself to Moses?

And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh sent me to you"" (Exodus 3: 14, literal translation).

• "'I will be what I will be.' The Holy One, blessed is He, answered Moses, 'Go and tell Israel: I have been with you in your servitude, and I will be with you in your servitude to the kingdoms ...' Rabbi Isaac interpreted: 'Tell them; it is I who was, I who am now, and I who will be in the future'" (Ber 9a).

# 2. What message was often given through the Biblical names of persons?

Then Adam named his wife Eve. She would become the mother of every living person (Genesis 3:20). (cf. Genesis 5:29 "Noah"; Genesis 17: 5 "Abra[ha]m"; Isaiah 7:3 "Shear-Jashub")

 "Four things can affect the future destiny of men and divert the calamity... prayer,

charity, repentance, and the change of names" (*Rosh Hashanah* 16b).

• "Rabbi Yosse says: Since the ancients were able to give names which contained the message of their future destiny, they knew their future in advance" (*Genesis Rabbah* 37:10).

## 3. What is the criterion for the true prophecy coming from God?

"But what if a prophet says peace will come? Only if it comes true will he be recognized as one who has been truly sent by the Lord" (Jeremiah 28:9).

# **4.** Why were the Hebrew prophets capable of predicting the future?

The Lord and King never does anything without telling his servants the prophets about it (Amos 3:7).

He explains deep and hidden things. He knows what happens in the darkest places. And where he is, everything is light (Daniel 2:22). (cf. vs. 29, 30)

## 5. How does the Bible regard human divination and future telling?

Some will tell you to ask for advice from people who get messages from

those who have died. Others will tell you to ask for advice from people who talk to the spirits of the dead. But those people only whisper. Their words are barely heard. So shouldn't you ask for advice from your God? Why should you get advice from dead people to help those who are alive (Isaiah 8:19, 20)? (cf. Daniel 2:11)

• "He who refrains from practicing divination is protected by God" (*Ned.* 32a).

## 6. How far could the prophet Daniel see into the future?

After you, another kingdom will take over. It won't be as powerful as yours. Next a third kingdom will rule over the whole earth...In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever (Daniel 2: 39, 44). (cf. vs. Daniel 7:17, 18)

• "Daniel and Jacob are the only ones to whom God has revealed what will happen at the end of times" (*Midrash Shoher Tov* 31:7).

## 7. What do the metals of Daniel 2 and the animals of Daniel 7 represent?

Nebuchadnezzar, you are the greatest king of all. The God of heaven has given you authority and power. He has given you might and glory . . . After you, another kingdom will take over. It won't be as powerful as yours. Next, a third kingdom will rule over the whole earth... Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom. It will be as strong as iron. Iron breaks and smashes everything to pieces. And the fourth kingdom will crush and break all of the others (Daniel 2:37, 39, 40).

"The four large animals stand for four kingdoms. The kingdoms will appear on the earth (Daniel 7:17).

# 8. What earthly kingdom is represented by the gold in Daniel 2 and the lion in Daniel 7?

The head of the statue was made out of pure gold. Its chest and arms were made of sliver. Its stomach and thighs were bronze (Daniel 2:32). (cf. vs. 37, 38)

The first animal was like a lion. It had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off. Then it was lifted up from the ground. It stood on two feet like a man. And a man's heart was given to it (Daniel 7:4). (cf. Daniel 4:4)

"I will be like a lion coming up from the bushes by the Jordan River. I will hunt in rich grasslands. I will chase

you from your land in an instant. What nation will I choose to do it? Which one will I appoint? Is anyone like me? Who would dare to argue with me? What leader can stand against me (Jeremiah 49:19)? (cf. vs. 22)

Babylon was like a gold cup in my hand. That city made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank its wine. So now they have gone crazy (Jeremiah 51:7). (cf. Isaiah 14:4)

- "The lion represents Babylon" (*Genesis Rabbah* 13:5).
- "The Babylonian empire was represented as a lion to indicate its great power. The high flying eagle symbolizes the great arrogance and pride of the Babylonians ... (see Isaiah 14:12-14) ... The eagle's wings represent the great speed and energy which were the Babylonian's hallmark" (Mayenei Ha-Yeshua 8:2: cf. Malbim).

# 9. What earthly kingdom is represented by the silver in Daniel 2 and the bear in Daniel 7?

"After you, another kingdom will take over. It won't be as powerful as yours. Next, a third kingdom will rule over the whole earth" (Daniel 2:39).

"PERES means that your authority over your kingdom will be taken away from you. It will be given to the Medes and Persians" (Daniel 5:28). (cf. 6:8; 8:20)

"I saw a second animal. It looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides. And it had three ribs between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up! Eat meat until you are full'" (Daniel 7:5).

I looked up and saw a ram that had two horns. He was standing beside the waterway. His horns were long. One of them was longer than the other. (Daniel 8:3).

- "The breast that comes after the head made of silver applies to the Medes and Persians who will come after the kingdom of Babylon" (Rashi, *Miqraoth Gdoloth* on Daniel 2:39).
- "'And behold another beast, a second like a bear (Daniel 7:5),' said R. Yohanan: This refers to the Persians who eat and drink like bears, have long hair like bears and are agitated like bears" (*Kidd*. 72a; see *Abodah Zarah* 2b).
- 10. What earthly kingdom is represented by the bronze in Daniel 2 and the leopard in Daniel 7?

The head of the statue was made out of pure gold. Its chest and arms were made of sliver. Its stomach and thighs were bronze (Daniel 2:32). (cf. vs. 39, Ezekiel 27:13)

After that, I saw another animal. It looked like a leopard. On its back were four wings like the wings of a bird. It had four heads. And it was given authority to rule (Daniel 7:6). (cf. Habakkuk 1:8)

 "Strong like bronze, this applies to Alexander the Great and his successors" (Rashi, Migraoth Gdoloth on Daniel 2:39).

# 11. What earthly kingdom is represented by the fourth entitythe iron in Daniel 2 and the beast with the ten horns in Daniel 7?

"Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom. It will be as strong as iron. Iron breaks and smashes everything to pieces. And the fourth kingdom will crush and break all of the others" (Daniel 2:40).

"After that, I saw another animal. It looked like a leopard. On its back were four wings like the wings of a bird. It had four heads. And it was given authority to rule (Daniel 7:7). (cf. vs. 23, 24; Isaiah 6:13)

 ""He shall devour the whole earth and shall tread it down and break it in pieces.' R.
 Yohanan says that this refers to Rome whose power is known to the whole world." (Abodah Zarah 2b)



notes

## 12. What spiritual power will grow out of the fourth animal?

"You saw that the feet and toes were made out of iron and baked clay. And the fourth kingdom will be divided up. But it will still be almost as strong as iron. That's why you saw iron mixed with clay" (Daniel 2:41). (cf. Isaiah 64:8)

"I thought about the horns. Then I saw another horn. It was a little one. It grew up among the other horns. Three of the first horns were pulled up by their roots to make room for it. The little horn had eyes like the eyes of a man. Its mouth was always bragging" (Daniel 7:8). (cf. vs. 20, 24, 25; Isaiah 14:13-14)

## 13. How long will this spiritual power of the fourth kingdom last?

"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever" (Daniel 2:44).

"I saw that the horn was at war with God's people. It was winning the battle over them" (Daniel 7:21).

• "'In the days of these kings.'
... while the kingdom of Rome
will be still standing. 'The
God of heaven will set up a
kingdom,' this is the kingdom
of the Holy Blessed Be He
which will never be worn, this
is the kingdom of the Messiah
King." (Rashi, Miqraoth
Gdoloth on Daniel 2:44)

# 14. What kingdom is represented by the last entity, the stone in Daniel 2 and the Son of Man in Daniel 7?

"While you were watching, a rock was cut out. But human hands didn't do it. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay. It smashed them" Daniel 2: 34). (cf. vs.35; cf. Isaiah 26:4; 44:8; Psalm 18:3)

"In my vision I saw One who looked like a son of man. He was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Eternal God. He was led right up to him" (Daniel 7:13). (cf. vs. 14, 26, 27; cf. Isaiah 19:1; Psalm 18:10-13)

 "This is the Messiah King who will come one day and will reign from one extremity

to the other extremity of the world, as it is written in Dan 2:35, 'the stone that hit the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth'" (*Pirqei Rabbi Eliezer Perll.* 2).

# 15. What spiritual or even historical lessons can be taken from the study of this prophecy?

"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom. It will never be destroyed. And no other nation will ever take it over. It will crush all of those other kingdoms. It will bring them to an end. But it will last forever" (Daniel 2:44). (cf. Daniel 2:21, 47)

• "Thus contemplating the cosmos, he [Abraham] came to the conclusion that there must be a Power higher and above all these powers visible to the eyes, who rules and guides the order of the universe" (Maaseh Abraham. 27-29).

#### **Dream of Kingdoms**

he dream looks beyond
Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom,
thus extending from the present to
the future until the end. Today it is possible,
in retrospect, to follow the prophet's
gaze through history. We can develop the
explanation of the dream parallel with the
unrolling of history, always checking the
prophet's testimony against historical reality.

The language of the vision is actually quite explicit for the king. Most likely the astrologers would have been able to decipher it once they knew its contents. Ancient Middle Eastern culture often used the statue of a human being to represent the world's destiny. Egyptian astrologers particularly employed it.4 Moreover, the number 4 was significant, since the ancients used it to symbolize the terrestrial dimension (Dan. 7:2; 11:4; Eze. 37:9; Rev. 7:1; 20: 8). The dream suggests two orders: the terrestrial order of the metals (Dan. 2:31-33) and the order of the stone (vs34, 35). The only question now concerns the meaning of the four metals and of the detached stone that engulfs the whole space formerly taken by the metals.

Daniel's explanation confirms and develops all this.

André J. FestugiPre, La Révélation d'Hermês Trismégiste (Paris: 1950), vol. 1, pp. 92, 93.

See the oracles of Persia and of Babylon in James B. Pritchard, ed., The Ancient Near East. Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton: 1969), pp. 606, 607; see also the Greek poet Hesiod of the eighth century B.C.E. (Works and Days 109-180), and even the Latin poet Ovid (Metamorphoses 1. 89-414).

1. The Statue notes

The head of gold. Nebuchadnezzar did not need Daniel's help to understand that the head of gold represented his own kingdom. The listing of the metals in descending order from head to toe and the successive events described in the destructive process of the stone, hint at a chronological progression. It was then possible for the king to deduce that the head represented the first stage, especially since the word "head" in Hebrew and in Aramaic means "beginning" or "first." Moreover, gold was the most popular metal in Babylon. Upon his arrival in Babylon, the Greek historian Herodotus could not but marvel at the lavish use of gold in temples and palace constructions. Walls, statues, and other objects of gold testified to Babylon's splendor and glory (Herodotus 1. 181, 183; 3. 1-7). The prophet Jeremiah compared Babylon to a golden cup (Jer. 51: 7), an interpretation Daniel now elaborates: "Nebuchadnezzar, you are the greatest king of all. The God of heaven has given you authority and power. He has given you might and glory. He has put everyone under your control. He has also given you authority over the wild animals and the birds of the air. It doesn't matter where they live. He has made you ruler over all of them. You are that head of gold" (Dan. 2: 37, 38).

The chest and arms of silver. After Babylon comes another kingdom, inferior to its predecessor, as the vision implicitly indicates through the lesser value of silver. Daniel also explicitly states: "After you, another kingdom will take over. It won't

be as powerful as yours" (Dan. 2:39). The succeeding kingdom is that of the Medes and the Persians.

Daniel uses the same expression several times to describe the kingdom following Babylon (Dan. 5:28; 6:8; 8:20). A century later the book of Esther confirms this (Esther 1:3). In spite of its larger geographical scope, the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians was culturally inferior to Babylon. In fact, Median and Persian conquerors adopted Babylonian civilization, by far the most complex and advanced until then.

The reference to silver alludes to a major characteristic of the next kingdom. Persians used silver in their taxation system. According to Herodotus (3. 89-95), the satraps had to pay the tribute imposed on them with silver. Only the more affluent Indian satraps had to pay their dues with gold. And even then, the authorities measured it in terms of silver. Clearly, the standard monetary value for the Persians of this era was silver. On a broader level. silver served as a characteristic for this kingdom in that it alluded to its wealth. wealth that guaranteed the Persian kings their power (Dan. 11:2). Indeed, history remembers them as the "rich and powerful" of the era. Herodotus testifies about Darius as "someone making profit from all" (Herodotus 3. 89). The supremacy of the Medo-Persian kingdom lasted from 539 B.C.E., the fall of Babylon, to 331 B.C.E., the defeat of the last Persian king, Darius III, by the Greco-Macedonian armies.

The belly and thighs of bronze. Bronze symbolizes the next kingdom, the conquering power of Greece. The metal was a Greek specialty. The prophet Ezekiel refers to bronze as the principal means of exchange among the Greeks (Eze. 27: 13).6 In addition, the Greek army employed bronze in their armor, helmets, shields, and even their weapons. We are told that when the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetic the First consulted the oracle of Laton inquiring of a way to avenge himself against his Persian foes, the reply said that "revenge would come from the sea in the hands of the men of bronze." The Egyptian monarch regarded the answer with some skepticism until the appearance one morning of shipwrecked Greek armies in their shiny bronze armor on the Egyptian shores. Seeing in them the fulfillment of the oracle, King Psammetic allied himself with them against his enemies (Herodotus 2. 153, 154).

In addition to a connotation of decadence following gold and silver, bronze also implied the idea of conquest. This bronze armor of the Greek soldiers sharply contrasted with the simple woven gowns by Median and Persian soldiers (Herodotus 7. 61, 62).

The legs of iron. After the age of bronze, the prophetic dream foretells a period of iron. Bronze was to the Greeks as iron was

The Hebrew text speaks of Yavan, which is the Hebrew word for "Greek." The word originally meant "pigeon" and probably alluded to the carrier pigeons kept on the Greek islands. From there the term came to designate the inhabitants of those islands (Felix M. Abel, Géographie de la Palestine [Paris: 1967], pp. 259, 260). Also, the word "Ionian," "Ionia" (from Ion, name of one of the sons of Helen), derives from the Hebrew Yavan.

to the Romans. Latin poets testify of this transition. Virgil describes armies of old as being equipped in bronze: "bronze flashes on their shields, flashes with bronze their sword." Likewise, Lutece contrasts bronze with that of iron: "The use of bronze was known before iron . . . With bronze men tilled the soil . . . with bronze they stirred up the waves of war." 8

Such passages in Latin literature testify that the transition of bronze to iron paralleled that of the Greek to the Roman Empire. Considering historical reality, the Roman army was indeed one of iron characterized by its sword, shield, armor, helmet, and particularly its *pilum*, an iron spear that could also serve as a javelin. But Daniel's description aims at more than the metal itself. Iron also symbolizes "strength" (verse 41), and a force that "breaks and smashes everything . . . to pieces" (verse 40).

Longevity is also a sign of strength. Roman rule lasted 500 years, by far longer than any of its predecessors. Rome would then succumb to barbarian invasions. Odoacet, a Germanic chief, dethroned the last emperor in 476.

The feet of iron and clay. Judging from the length of it—more than half of the passage (verses 41-43)—the events here described seem to have been of primary interest to the prophet. The text does not describe this new kingdom as being separate from the one of iron preceding it. Rather, it still belongs to the fourth kingdom, as the traces of iron indicate.

Virgil Aeneid 7. 742, 743.

<sup>8</sup> Lucretius De Rerum Natura 5. 1286-1294.

But a new element, that of clay, mixes with the old. This strange association takes on three levels of meaning:

- 1. It "will be a divided kingdom" (verse 41). The relationship here is a negative one. The association of clay and iron implies division, a fact particularly significant, since it occurs right after a period characterized by its unity. A retrospective look at history confirms this. Indeed, since the fall of Rome the region of the former empire has yet to achieve unity and if we are to believe the prophet, it will never do so.
- 2. "And the fourth kingdom will be partly strong and partly weak" (verse 42). The passage regards iron and clay as distinct entities. Iron is to strength as clay is to weakness. The kingdom, now divided, becomes a heterogeneous composition of weak and strong elements. The territory of the former Roman Empire is a collection of both strong and weak, rich and poor nations.

When the Bible employs the word "clay," it is always in association with the word "potter," and it always evokes the human person in a relationship of dependence upon the Creator. 10 The reference to clay thus has a strong religious connotation. We have good reasons to believe that the clay at the base of the statue represents a different power of a religious nature, though associated with the political power symbolized by iron.

André Alba, Rome et le Moyen Age jusqu'en 1328 (Paris: 1964), p. 126.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Isa. 29:16; 41:25; 45:9; Jer. 18:2; 19:1; Lam. 4:2; Rom. 9:21.

On a historical level, this means that following the dissolution of the Roman Empire a new power would take over, a religious one related more or less to the political power of Rome. This politicoreligious power should even be alive today, since the text has it surviving until the time of the end.

3. "And the fourth kingdom will be made up of all kinds of people" (verse 43). The relationship is now a positive one alluding to a tentative alliance between the two elements. Then, "in the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom" (verse 44).

Also, this period is the only one in the vision during which any action takes place. Previously, the inspired explanations focused on a state of being or a quality: "divided" (verse 41); "partly strong" and "partly weak" (verse 42,). Whereas the two characteristics describe a state that lasts until the end, the action that is now described takes place at the end of time.

If a renewed concern for unity does characterize the end-times, it is strangely relevant today. Never in human history have there been so many worldwide attempts at unity. It is a distinctive feature of modern politics. For the first time, the powers of the earth feel the need to merge and come together, thus encouraging alliances on all levels: political ones such as NATO, OAU, UN, etc.; economic coalitions such as the Common Market, the EEC, OPEC, etc.; and even religious alliances such as the ecumenical movement, and politico-religious ones like the "religious right".

But recently humanity has been concocting a more audacious alliance. Going beyond mere continental or ideological coalitions, world powers since the fall of Communism, now dare to dream of global politics, i.e. the New World Order.

Could it be that prophecy is referring to our time?

#### 2. The Stone

We now enter the most important part of the vision. It occupies the largest portion of the king's dream and seems to be the point toward which everything converges. It is the second part of the dream, the explanation of which follows the same two-part structure as the exposition (see above). Earlier Daniel introduced his explanation with a reference to the "God of heaven" who gives dominion (Dan. 2:37). Likewise, the prophet begins the second part with a comment regarding the "God of heaven" who will set up a kingdom (verse 44). This parallel on the introductory level, implicitly contrasts the two parts of the dream. In the first part, the kingdoms are given to humanity, while in the second part the "God of heaven" sets up the kingdom and it remains in His control. In fact, this kingdom is nothing like the previous earthly kingdom.

The essential difference lies in the fact that it comes from elsewhere: its mission accomplished, the stone carved out of the mountain changes back to a "huge mountain" (verse 35). The coincidence between the origin and the outcome implicitly testifies to the kingdom's divine nature. Nothing of the old order remains.

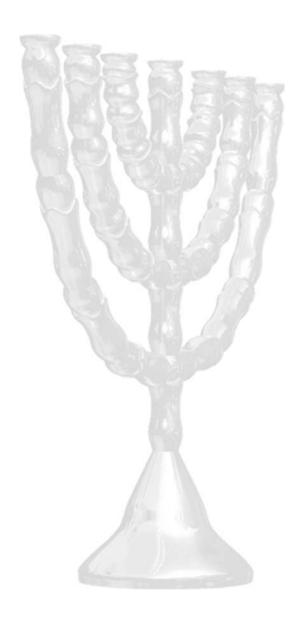
Finally, the new kingdom "will last forever" (verse 44). The earthly kingdoms were temporary; and all eventually collapsed. The final kingdom, on the other hand, will last forever. The eternal defeats the ephemeral. We can appreciate the contrast between the two orders even on a spatial level. Gigantic as it was, the statue becomes dwarfed by the mountain that "filled the whole earth" (verse 35). The infinite overwhelms the finite.

The heavenly kingdom spreads over the whole earth and remains forever. Our rational minds find this hard to imagine. So, we find ourselves tempted to follow a number of theologians and philosophers who "demythologize" the vision. The kingdom of heaven subsequently takes on the more reasonable proportions of a church, a people, the enlightened self, and so on.

Jewish tradition views the final kingdom as representing all the hopes of Israel. It cannot be human but must be the kingdom of the Messiah. Rashi and Ibn Ezra, following ancient Jewish interpretation, regarded it as that of "King Messiah," malkut melek hamashiah. 12

It is not difficult to recognize the historical plausibility of Daniel's prophecy. We can easily identify the kingdoms of Babylon, the Medes and Persians, Greece, Rome, etc. And we may even be convinced that God sent the dream and join Nebuchadnezzar in admitting that He "explains mysteries" (verse 47). But when it comes to events beyond history, such as the nebulous kingdom of God, we would rather remain skeptical.

Migraoth Gdoloth.





"But there is a God in heaven Who reveals secrets. And He has made known... What will be in the latter days."

Daniel 2:28