Kingdom Come: The Hellenistic Jewish Adaptation of the Four-Kingdom Schema

The schematization of history via a paradigm of four eras or kingdoms, each associated with a metal of decreasing value, has its roots deep in the archaic period. Hesiod famously describes the ages of man in this way in the *Works and Days*, and similar accounts occur in extant Babylonian and Persian literature (Collins 1984). Yet despite the antiquity of this schema, the paradigm remained vibrant well into the Roman era. In particular, the four-kingdom schema was appropriated by Jews of the Hellenistic and Roman periods as part of a genre of resistance against the imperialism of Greeks and Romans (Murphy 2011). In this paper, I will discuss the Jewish appropriation of this ancient genre and will explore how it was made to serve Jewish anti-colonialist interests in the face of Greek and Roman rule.

The most famous instance of the four-kingdom schema in Jewish literature occurs in Daniel 2 (with a parallel account in Daniel 7). Thought to be written during the Hellenistic era, this chapter gives an account of a dream in which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon sees a statue with four distinct segments of gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Much as in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the author himself is likely living in the age of iron, a difficult time. These segments are interpreted to refer to four kingdoms, the first of which is Nebuchadnezzar's own kingdom. Unlike in Hesiod's account, however, the sequence does not end with utter degradation and despair. Instead, at the end of the sequence of four kingdoms, the "God of heaven" intervenes in the course of world events and sets up his own kingdom "that will never be destroyed". In conjunction with the more detailed but parallel account in Daniel 7, it is clear that the four-kingdom schema promulgated in Daniel 2 was written as a sort of anti-imperialist document to counter the seemingly inexorable might of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Although their rule seemed unshakeable and their oppression unendurable, the Jews who wrote and read these accounts

believed in a better future. This was all the more remarkable since the very Greeks who oppressed them might have related to Jews their own schema in which, as Hesiod puts it, at the end "bitter sorrows will be left for mortal men, and there will be no help against evil" (*Works and Days* 200-201).

The four-kingdom schema survives elsewhere in Jewish literature in *Sibylline Oracle 4*, a "prophecy" set in the mouth of a sibyl and very likely written in the Diaspora (perhaps at Alexandria) in the Hellenistic period. Much like Daniel 2, *Sibylline Oracle 4* envisions a series of four kingdoms ending in the empire of "boastful Greece". A subsequent revision from the late first-century CE attempts to "update" the oracle by adding Rome as an unnumbered epenthetic kingdom. Whether ending in Greece or Rome, the sequence of destructive eras seems at first to share more with the account in *Works and Days* than the one in Daniel; an emphasis is laid on the failing morality of mankind at the end of days, and the adverse acts of a divinity which doom "the race of men". However, in the end the oracle agrees with Daniel by foreseeing a future blessed existence in which the righteous (presumably Jews) will inherit the earth without the interference of the kingdoms which oppressed them in previous eras. Thus, both Daniel 2 and *Sibylline Oracle 4* represent two different exempla of a genre of Jewish resistance literature meant to provide hope for the future in the face of what must have seemed to be the hopeless future promised by the ruling Greeks and Romans.

Bibliography

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Murphy, Frederick J. 2011. *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*. Grand Rapids: Baker.