

LESSON 24

But was Domitian really a persecutor?

Before we answer that question, let's let the ancient historian Seutonius answer another question for us — was Domitian playing with a full deck? Were the Christians dealing with a *sane* ruler or an *insane* one? Seutonius wrote:

In the beginning of his reign, [Domitian] used to spend daily an hour by himself in private, during which time he did nothing else but catch flies, and stick them through the body with a sharp pin. When some one therefore inquired, “whether any one was with the emperor,” it was significantly answered by Vibius Crispus, “Not so much as a fly.”

I think we will all agree from that description that Domitian had some serious mental health issues — which makes him even more dangerous. Perhaps a modern day example of Domitian would be Kim Jong-un, the “dear leader” of North Korea.

With that background for Domitian, let's now go back to our original question — was Domitian really a persecutor of God's people? Some argue that Domitian was not actually a great persecutor of the church, but was later turned into one by those who wanted to make him fit the description of the eighth king. Is that a fair criticism? Yes, and no. Yes, in the sense that some commentators have overstated the evidence for Domitian to perhaps make him a better fit for their theories. One such statement describes Domitian as “the emperor who bathed the empire in the blood of Christians.” We have such evidence for Nero, but not for Domitian. Is it possible Domitian did that? Yes. Likely that he did? Perhaps. Do we know for sure that he did that? No.

But saying that we do not know whether Domitian bathed the empire in the blood of the saints does not mean that we cannot know whether he was a persecutor. I think we can, and I think he was. And I would point to three sources of evidence: circumstantial, Biblical, and extra-Biblical (not listed in order of importance!).

But before pointing to any evidence, we should note that much of the extra-Biblical evidence has been destroyed, and it happened soon after Domitian's death. We are told that upon Domitian's death, the Roman Senate was:

Overjoyed ... [and assailed] the dead emperor with the most insulting and stinging kind of outcries ... Finally they passed a decree that his inscriptions should everywhere be erased, and all record of him obliterated.

This decree, which is called the *damnatio memoriae*, destroyed all the statues and inscriptions of Domitian, such as Domitian's arch at Hierapolis and dedicatory inscriptions at the Temple of the Sabastoi in Ephesus. The handout (upper left image, available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com) shows the remains of the shattered statue of Domitian that stood in front of that Ephesian temple. But they could not destroy everything — and, in particular, they could not destroy all of the coins. Look at the coin shown at the upper right of the handout. There we see strong circumstantial evidence that Domitian was a persecutor of Christians. The front of that coin (not on the handout) shows Domitian. On the reverse (shown on the handout) is Domitian's infant son, who was born in the second consulship of Domitian in AD 73 and who died in AD 82, the second year after he became emperor. That child of Domitian is depicted as seated on a globe with his arms outstretched surrounded by seven stars! The inscription surrounding the child, *DIVUS CAESARIMP DOMITIANIE*, means “the divine Caesar, son of the emperor Domitian.” If Domitian believed his son was divine, what does that tell us about how he viewed himself? And where else have we seen the image of someone called the son of God surrounded by seven stars?

Revelation 1:13-16 — *And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. **And he had in his right hand seven stars:** and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength.*

Revelation 2:18 — *These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass.*

Coins minted during Domitian's reign show his son as a god reaching for seven stars. How could such a person not come in conflict with Christianity? Particularly when we know how unbalanced he was?

As for the Biblical evidence, we have looked at much of it already. There is a reason Christians have been seeing Domitian in the pages of Revelation for two millennia. If our interpretation is correct, then there was to be a revived persecution by an "eighth king" who would arise after the death of Nero. Who else could this be but Domitian? The Bible is our best evidence on this subject, and it does just about everything in pointing to Domitian but mention him by name. (But Nero is never mentioned *by name* in the Bible, either.)

As for the extra-Biblical evidence, there is quite a bit (but admittedly not as much as we have for Nero). When Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan in AD 111 for advice on how to conduct trials for Christians, he said that some Christians had defected "as much as 25 years ago." That would have been during the reign of Domitian. And when Pliny says he had never been present for any such trials, the only time in Pliny's life when such trials would have likely occurred is during the reign of

Domitian. When Melito, a bishop of the church in Sardis, wrote an apology to the emperor Marcus Aurelius in AD 175, Eusebius tells us he wrote, “Nero, and Domitian, alone, stimulated by certain malicious persons, showed a disposition to slander our faith.”

Tertullian was an attorney in Carthage, and in his apology to Septimius Severus in AD 197, he wrote: “Consult your histories. There you will find that Nero was the first to rage with the imperial sword against this school in the very first hour of its rise in Rome,” and “Domitian too, who was a good deal of a Nero in cruelty, attempted it ... soon stopped ... restored those he had banished. Such are ever our persecutors.” Eusebius quotes Tertullian to the effect that John returned from exile on Patmos during the reign of Domitian and lived in Ephesus until the reign of Trajan.

Hegesippus, who lived between AD 117 and 189, writes of Christians who were called before Domitian and examined by him. Upon hearing them, “Domitian despising them, made no reply; but treating them with contempt, as simpletons, commanded them to be dismissed, and by a decree ordered the persecution to cease.” Eusebius, who published his church history in AD 325, describes Domitian as “the second that raised a persecution against us.”

Thus, the extra-Biblical evidence points to a Domitian persecution. Perhaps it was not as bad as Nero’s and perhaps it was intermittent at times, but it could still be very, very bad and not be as bad as what Nero had done. Domitian persecuted God’s people. To those who argue otherwise, I would respond as did Tertullian: “Consult your histories!” And also consult your Bible! How can anyone not see Rome and Domitian in the book of Revelation when those scriptures are viewed alongside the historical record — and particularly the contemporary coinage that uses the exact same imagery that we see in Revelation, from the child and the seven stars to the woman seated upon seven hills.

Daniel 7:26-27

26 But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end. 27 And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.

Verses 26 and 27 contain one of the most incredible and wonderful prophecies in the Bible. We find there a prophecy that could never have come from the mind of man, and that no one would ever believe absent faith in the God who revealed it to us. These two verses are a prophecy that the church would overthrow and outlast the mighty Roman empire!

Who could believe such a thing? The Roman empire — with all of its vast wealth and power? The Roman empire — with all of its soldiers and politicians? The Roman empire — with all of its far flung territories? The Roman empire — which feared nothing and no one? How could such an empire ever be defeated by anything — much less by a small religious sect composed mainly of the lower classes and slaves? What could such a group ever do to damage Rome in any way, much less defeat it? Well, for starters, that small seemingly powerless group had very powerful friends! And that small group had very powerful weapons — the word of God and prayer! And if Rome had taken the time to read the writings of that group, they

would have known, not only that they would be defeated by that small group, but that their fate had been sealed 500 years earlier!

What we see in verses 26 and 27 is the small stone not made with human hands striking and destroying that giant statue made up of the earthly kingdoms of this world, including Rome as the base of that statue — the part that was struck by the rock.

But how can we know that these are actual prophecies? Maybe they were written after the fact. Four words — *the Dead Sea scrolls*. We have copies of Daniel that pre-date the reign of Augustus by a century. Do you see now why the liberals — despite all of the evidence to the contrary — are so insistent that the fourth kingdom in Daniel is Greece rather than Rome? If they agree that the fourth kingdom is Rome, then they must also agree that the Bible is from God and not from man — and that fact is something they will never accept.

Daniel 7:28

28 Hitherto is the end of the matter. As for me Daniel, my cogitations much troubled me, and my countenance changed in me: but I kept the matter in my heart.

Daniel was greatly alarmed by what he had seen. Why? Because he had been given a glimpse of the great persecution that awaited the people of God — and that disturbed him. Daniel loved God and God's people — so he was troubled by the persecutions that lay ahead for them. Also, Daniel bore the burden of this knowledge alone because he was either unwilling or unable to make the vision known when he first received it. (Verse 28 says that he kept the matter in his heart.)

CHAPTER 8

With Chapter 8, the book of Daniel switches back to the Hebrew language. Recall that since Chapter 2, Daniel's record has been given to us in Aramaic.

As we mentioned earlier, the use of different languages possibly has to do with different audiences. Some argue that the Aramaic sections had messages primarily for the Babylonians and that the Hebrew sections had messages primarily for the Jews — but Chapter 7 was in Aramaic, and it had an important message for the Jews. The short answer is that we don't know why Daniel was written using two languages.

The handout (middle right, available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com) shows a copy of Daniel from the Dead Sea scrolls, and the yellow arrow is pointing to the break between the Aramaic of Chapter 7 and the Hebrew of Chapter 8. Notice that it is all on the same scroll. The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls completely obliterated any argument that Daniel was written in the second century BC, and yet the liberal critics fiercely maintain that position. Why? Because of the evidence? No, the evidence is against them. Then why? Because of their naturalist world-view.

Although certain symbols in Chapter 8 may remind us of symbols that were used in Chapter 7, we must keep in mind one of our principles of interpretation: Similarity of language does not prove identity of subjects. While the primary subject of Chapter 7 was the fourth kingdom (Rome), the primary subject of Chapter 8 is the third kingdom (Greece).

Daniel 8:1-2

**1 In the third year of the reign of king Belshazzar
a vision appeared unto me, even unto me Daniel,**

after that which appeared unto me at the first. 2 And I saw in a vision; and it came to pass, when I saw, that I was at Shushan in the palace, which is in the province of Elam; and I saw in a vision, and I was by the river of Ulai.

Daniel received this vision in the third year of Belshazzar's reign. If that is the third year of his coregency with his father Nabonidus, then Daniel received this vision in 550 BC.

Although we have moved forward in time two years between the vision in Chapter 7 and the vision in Chapter 8, the focus of this vision is the third kingdom rather than the fourth, which means that the subject of the vision has moved backward in time from what we were seeing in Chapter 7.

Again, we are faced with a choice in verse 1. Either this book was written and these visions were received in the sixth century BC or its author was a liar. Jesus called Daniel a prophet and said that we should believe all that the prophets had written (Matthew 24:15; Luke 24:25). The Bible is not a grocery store where we can take what we want and reject the rest. If the book of Daniel is not trustworthy, then none of the Bible is trustworthy.

I am amazed at the liberal commentaries that reject the historical accuracy of the Bible while simultaneously trumpeting the theology of the Bible. If the Bible is not accurate regarding what we *can* see, then how can we trust the Bible when it tells us about what we *cannot* see? It all reminds me a bit of 1 John 4:20 — “for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?”

About the time that Daniel received this vision, Cyrus was establishing the Medo-Persian Empire, which would bring an end to the period of Babylonian supremacy

within just twelve years. Nabonidus, observing this union, became apprehensive about Cyrus's intentions and attempted to forge an alliance with Lydia and Egypt to protect himself against a possible Medo-Persian threat. The whole world was anxiously watching to see what Cyrus would do. God may have given the vision at this particular time to assure Daniel and his fellow exiles that the Jews would survive as a people long after Cyrus (and Belshazzar) had passed from the scene. By now Daniel was about seventy, yet he was still faithfully serving God.

The city of Susa (or Shushan of Esther 1:2) has been identified, and the palace of Xerxes (also from Esther) was discovered there in the late 1800's. It is not clear whether Daniel was in Susa when he received the vision or if the setting of the vision was Susa. Verse 16 seems to support the former view because it occurs after the vision and shows Daniel on the banks of the Ulai river, which was near Susa (but verse 16 could also be a second vision, so we can't say for sure). Also, verse 27 says that after the vision Daniel rose up and did the king's business — but the king there could be either Belshazzar (in Babylon) or Nabonidus (possibly in Susa). Most commentaries today think that Daniel was in Babylon and saw Susa only in a vision, but I'm not so sure. Josephus said that Daniel was in Susa, and it does seem to fit well with the evidence.

This "river" was actually a wide artificial canal (about 900 feet across) that connected the Choaspes River and the Coprates River.

If Daniel was in Susa then what was he doing there? When Daniel had his vision, Susa was already an ancient city and was the capital of Elam. Later it would become the winter residence of the Persian kings. The significance of the location is probably that it was outside of the Babylonian empire and near the center of future power.

As we said, Nabonidus was likely negotiating with Lydia and Egypt, hoping to form a triple alliance against the Medes (Babylon's former friend) and the Persians. (Keep in mind that this vision was received under the old Chaldean kingdom, before Cyrus conquered them.) Perhaps Daniel was acting as an ambassador in these

difficult negotiations, which may explain what he was doing in Susa. It would also explain why Daniel was still serving as an official during (at least part of) the reign of Belshazzar, but seems to have been unknown to Beleshazzar in Chapter 5. Also, there is evidence that Nabonidus himself was in Susa, and Daniel may have accompanied him there.

If you travel to Susa today (it is in Iran, so not recommended!) you can see the supposed tomb of Daniel. Both Jewish and Arab traditions say that Daniel was buried in Susa. (The image on the middle left of the handout available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com shows what the supposed tomb of Daniel looks like today — at least before ISIS blows it up as they recently did with the supposed tomb of Jonah.)

In 1901 archaeologists discovered the famous Code of Hammurabi in Susa, where it had been taken as plunder in the twelfth century BC. That famous code had been in Susa 700 years by the time the events in Daniel occurred!

Daniel 8:3

3 Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last.

Daniel sees a ram with two horns, with one horn higher than the other and the higher one coming up last. What does the ram denote? We saw something similar with the bear in Daniel 7:5. It also was higher on one side, and you'll recall that the bear was the second kingdom — Medo-Persia, with the higher side denoting the dominant Persians. But, similarity of symbols does not denote similarity of subject,

so we need more than just that similarity to conclude that this ram is also Medo-Persia. Fortunately, we have much more. We have verse 20 — “The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.” So there is no doubt at all about the identity of this ram. (We will discuss these kings when we get to verse 20.)

Again, one must wonder where the liberals get their idea that Daniel thought the Medes and the Persians were separate kingdoms at this time. How could the text be any more clear? We have one ram, and that one ram represents the Medes and the Persians. In the previous chapter, one bear represented the Medes and the Persians. The ram and the bear each act as a single unified entity. And what about Daniel 5:28? “Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.” And what about Daniel 6:8? “And sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians.” How does the phrase “the law of the Medes and Persians” make any sense if they were separate kingdoms? Why don’t the liberals see this? They do see it, but they have a hidden agenda — naturalism at any cost, even when that cost is their own intellectual integrity.

This ram has two horns, which denote the Medes and the Persians. One horn is higher than the other. This higher horn denotes the supremacy of the Persians in their merger with the Medes (just as we saw with the higher side on the bear in Chapter 7). This higher horn comes up last. This temporal order is in perfect accord with history. The Medes were the dominant power until Cyrus the Great came along and brought prominence to the Persians.

Daniel 8:4

4 I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that

could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and became great.

This verse gives us a completely accurate picture of the military conquests of the Medo-Persians. The three areas of the Medo-Persian expansion were:

- Westward toward Lydia, Ionia, Thrace, and Macedon.
- Northward toward the Caspians and the Scythians.
- Southward to Babylon and Egypt.

In these campaigns, the Medo-Persians were nearly invincible and, as pictured here, their targets were helpless against them. Medo-Persia and its king, Cyrus, became arrogant, and Cyrus “did according to his will, and became great” (verse 4). The careful student of the Bible might infer from this language that Cyrus is ripe for a fall.

Cyrus has a fascinating history in the Bible. First, he was mentioned in Isaiah by name long before he was even born (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1). Second, Cyrus was the king who allowed the exiles to return and rebuild Jerusalem, and Ezra 1:1 tells us that Cyrus did that because God stirred up his spirit to do so. Why? Again, Ezra 1:1 tells us why — so that the word of God by the mouth of Jeremiah would be fulfilled.

Later, my plan is to have a special lesson on God and time. Specifically, I want us to consider how the prophecies in Daniel came to be fulfilled, and how God knew what was going to happen. Were the prophecies fulfilled because God caused those things to happen (which is what Ezra 1:1 says with regard to at least one prophecy) or was God simply able to look forward into time and tell us what would happen? For example, the three uprooted civil war kings in Daniel 7 — did God cause them to be raised as emperor and then killed, or was God simply able to look ahead into time and tell Daniel what was going to happen? We might be tempted to ask, what difference does it make? But if God is able to look ahead now and tell me everything

I will ever think or do, then do I really have free will? And, more importantly, how does the Bible answer those questions? (We just saw one answer in Ezra 1:1, but we will consider many other scriptures in that special lesson.) Why is such a lesson needed in our study of Daniel? Because when we get to Daniel 11 we will see some of the most detailed predictive prophecies found anywhere.