PART ONE

THE BIBLICAL SOURCES
CHAPTER ONE

THE FOUR EMPIRES

The conceptualization of a world history divided into four kingdoms or empires that would anticipate the establishment of the divine kingship on earth is a motif fully described for the first time in the book of Daniel, chapters 2 and 7. However, one cannot say that it was the first time that we observe an attempt for historical periodization, because we are dealing with what appears to be a very ancient motif, which some scholars track as far back as Zoroastrianism. Nevertheless, Daniel’s description influenced the development of a later Christian philosophy of history, and it is in that perspective that we need to analyse it. Also, this concept as it was introduced in the Bible was one of the most important factors for the development of specific lines of understanding historical time since the 2nd century B.C. within the Jewish-Christian traditions.

A. Daniel

In the book of Daniel (c.2nd century B.C.), we have two different accounts of historical periodization based on the scheme of four succeeding empires. The first is found in chapter 2, in the description of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, while the second is reported in chapters 7 and 8, when the four beasts are described, particularly when the two last periods of the four-age schema are depicted using the figures of the ram and the he-goat. Although in a certain way this second description (chapter 8) is limited to the last two periods of time, it is also much more detailed than the two previous accounts. In fact, although the two visions’ content concerns the same subject, the second vision offers more insight regarding the events predicted to happen during the two last empires.

The book of Daniel is normally divided in two main parts: one containing tales and the other containing apocalyptic visions. This will

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1 The subject is fully discussed in Hultgard, “Persian Apocalypticism.”