The Seven Heads of the Beast and Israel's Sovereignty

Why These Kingdoms Appear in Revelation 17

Chris White
Independent Researcher | Chris White Ministries
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Abstract

A familiar premillennial interpretation of Revelation 17 identifies the first six heads of the beast as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. This paper argues that these empires appear as heads of the beast chiefly because each held sovereignty over Israel or Judah in its own land. The seventh kingdom must therefore hold sovereignty over Israel as well. Daniel 7:24 places the ten kings in power before the Antichrist rises and subdues three of them. If this thesis is correct, Israel will lose its independence under the ten kings before the Antichrist comes to power.

Keywords: Revelation 17; Daniel 7; seven heads; Israel; sovereignty; ten kings; Antichrist; premillennialism

1 Introduction

What does Israel's history under foreign rule tell us about its future under the seventh head of the beast? Premillennial interpreters have long identified the six historical heads in Revelation 17 with empires that ruled Israel. John F. Walvoord presents this reading in his discussion of Joseph Seiss, and Mark Hitchcock defends it in detail.[1] Each held the power to decide how Israel or Judah would be governed. That shared sovereignty explains why the first six are counted and why the seventh must hold the same power.

By *sovereignty* I mean the ultimate authority to make and enforce decisions of government. An ancient Judean could live under Jewish law, obey a Jewish ruler, and pay taxes to officials in Jerusalem while a foreign king decided who could hold office there. Modern Israel could retain its name, population, and governing institutions after losing the power to determine its own affairs. The prophetic question is who would have the final say.

2 The six kingdoms in Revelation 17

The angel tells John that the seven heads are seven mountains and also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is in power, and one is yet to come (Rev. 17:9–10). Daniel supplies a reason to understand a king here as representing his kingdom. The angel calls the four beasts "four kings" in Daniel 7:17 and calls the fourth beast "the fourth kingdom" in verse 23.[2] John draws on the same vision. His beast has the features of Daniel's leopard, bear, and lion, and the ten horns of Daniel's fourth beast (Rev. 13:1–2). In Revelation 17 the heads succeed one another. The ten horns represent ten kings who act together (vv. 12–13).

1 John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Moody Press, 1966), on Revelation 17:8–11, quoting Joseph A. Seiss, online commentary. Mark L. Hitchcock, "A Critique of the Preterist View of Revelation 17:9–11 and Nero," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164, no. 656 (2007), 480–84, journal entry.

2 Biblical quotations are from the King James Version.

Rome held imperial power in John's day. Reading Rome as the sixth head anchors the sequence in John's day. Greece preceded Rome in Judea. Daniel 8:20–22 expressly identifies Greece and its predecessor, Medo-Persia, and treats the kingdoms that followed Alexander as divisions of the Greek conquest. Daniel 5:28–31 places Babylon immediately before Medo-Persia. That leaves two places before Babylon. Isaiah recalls Israel's subjection first in Egypt and then under Assyria (Isa. 52:4). Those two powers complete the five that had fallen by John's day. Egypt's place first in Israel's memory reaches back to the exodus. Its later authority over Judah gives us a separate way to test its inclusion on political grounds.

For John's first readers, Roman sovereignty in Judea had a concrete meaning. The high priesthood survived Pompey's capture of Jerusalem, but Pompey settled who would hold it and made Jerusalem tributary to Rome. Josephus understood the result as a loss of his people's liberty.[3] What Rome had taken from Judea is also what the earlier empires had held.

3 Why sovereignty accounts for the choice

Daniel's own account of the beasts gives political dominion particular weight. The earlier beasts lose their dominion even though their lives are prolonged (Dan. 7:12). At the judgment of the last ruler, the court takes away his dominion, and the kingdom is given to the people of the saints of the Most High (vv. 26–27). A people can survive the fall of its empire. What changes hands in the vision is the authority to rule. Revelation preserves that emphasis when the dragon gives the beast its throne and authority (Rev. 13:2). The historical question is why these particular holders of imperial power appear in the succession.

Between Judah's submission to Assyria under Ahaz in the eighth century BC and Pompey's capture of Jerusalem in 63 BC, only six foreign imperial powers established their rule over Judah or Judea. They are the six that premillennial interpreters identify in Revelation 17. This counts the Greek successor dynasties together, as Daniel 8:21–22 does. There were also years of Jewish independence. A historian approaching the subject through the political history of Judea arrives at the same principal powers. Lawrence Wills traces Israel's position under Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, followed by the Greek successor states and Rome.[4]

The books of Kings record the decisions by which foreign sovereignty can be recognized. Ahaz declared himself the Assyrian king's servant and sent him silver and gold (2 Kings 16:7–9). Assyria subsequently took Samaria and deported inhabitants of the northern kingdom (17:3–6). When the people of Judah chose Jehoahaz as king, Pharaoh Necho removed him, installed his brother, and imposed tribute. The king of Babylon later installed Zedekiah in Jerusalem (23:30–35 and 24:15–17). Judah still had kings of its own in all three dealings. The foreign ruler's power to reverse Judah's choice of king shows where sovereignty lay.

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3 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.73–77, trans. Ralph Marcus, especially 14.77. Compare 20.244 on the restrictions Pompey placed on Hyrcanus.

4 Lawrence M. Wills, *Introduction to the Apocrypha* (Yale University Press, 2021), excerpted in "Jews in the Greek and Roman Periods," Yale University Press, October 4, 2021. Wills describes the political history. The claim about the correspondence with Revelation 17 is my own.

Persia offers the most revealing case because the Jews had good reason to welcome its intervention. Cyrus authorized their return and the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1:1–4). Darius ordered provincial revenues used to pay for the work (6:6–12). Nehemiah governed Judah by royal appointment (Neh. 5:14). The prayer in Nehemiah 9 explains how the Judeans understood their position. They recall their distress from the days of the Assyrian kings down to their own day (v. 32). They are living on the land God gave their fathers and eating what it produces, yet they call themselves servants there. Its harvest goes to the kings God has set over them. Those kings exercise power over their persons and livestock (vv. 36–37). The temple had been rebuilt. Jews governed locally. The Persian king still held sovereignty. Any explanation that depends on all six empires having pursued the same hostile religious policy has difficulty accounting for Persia. The Judeans' own description accounts for its place in the list.

Greek rule provides a comparable test. Under Antiochus IV a royal decree reached as far as sacrifice, Sabbath observance, and circumcision (1 Macc. 1:41–50). A later king's remission of tribute was important enough for the Judean author of 1 Maccabees to date the lifting of foreign rule from that year (13:36–42). Rome in turn brought Judean independence to an end in 63 BC. These witnesses differ in what they thought their rulers ought to do. They agree on what it meant to live under another kingdom.

The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 ended the ancient Judean national government centered there. Josephus ends his account of the succession of high priests with the Roman capture of the city.[5] Jewish life in the land continued. Centuries later the Ottomans and the British governed the territory, but neither took over that ancient Judean government. The proposed heads held authority over Israel as a governed people in its land. Possession of the territory alone would produce a different list.

4 Israel under the seventh head

John counts the future kingdom as the seventh member of the same succession (Rev. 17:10). They differed in territory, in the offices they permitted Jews to hold, and in their treatment of Jewish worship. What all six did, and what accounts for the correspondence between this list and Judah's history under foreign rule, was to exercise the authority of government over Israel. Sovereignty over Israel defines the succession. The seventh kingdom must exercise that same authority. An empire could threaten Israel, persecute Jews abroad, or go to war with Jerusalem while Israel remained an independent state. The record of the six points to a more definite political relationship.

There is precedent for drawing that conclusion. J. Hampton Keathley III explains the earlier heads by reference to Israel's successive experiences under them, including Persia's authorization to rebuild. Kelly Sensenig draws the inference directly. "Six previous kingdoms

5 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.249–51, especially 20.251.

have controlled Israel and a final seventh kingdom will yet control Israel."[6] The remaining question is when Israel comes under that government.

Daniel 7:24 places the ten kings before the Antichrist: "another shall rise after them." He then subdues three of the ten. I identify the government of the ten with the seventh head.[7]

5 What Christians should expect

In "World Government Before the Antichrist," I argue that Daniel 7:24 places the ten kings in power before the little horn rises among them and subdues three of them. Since the seventh kingdom holds sovereignty over Israel, Christians should expect Israel to lose its sovereignty under the ten kings before the Antichrist rises.

Many premillennial Christians understand the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 as the fulfillment of Ezekiel's dry bones prophecy and therefore expect Israel's sovereignty to endure. In "Did Israel Fulfill Ezekiel's Dry Bones Prophecy in 1948?" I argue that the restoration in Ezekiel 36–37 includes reconciliation with God and permanent rule under the Davidic king. On that reading, Israel can lose its sovereignty before the Antichrist rises without overturning Ezekiel's promise.[8]

6 J. Hampton Keathley III, "The Beast and the False Prophet (Rev 13:1–18)," *Studies in Revelation*, on the seven heads. Kelly Sensenig, "Heads, Hills, Horns, and Harlots (Revelation 17:9–14)," 11–13, quotation on 13. Sensenig identifies the seventh with a revived Roman Empire under the Antichrist.

7 See my *A Bible Prophecy Timeline* (CWM Publishing, 2026), chap. 1, and "World Government Before the Antichrist: The Ten Kings and the Little Horn in Daniel 7," working paper, 2026, §§2–3, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24594492.

8 See my "Did Israel Fulfill Ezekiel's Dry Bones Prophecy in 1948? Ezekiel 36–37 and the Regathering of Israel," working paper, 2026, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24594500.

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