

Since the four kingdoms do not show a downward progression in extent or power, the theory has been advanced that there is a downward progression in some other aspect, such as the authority of the king. According to this idea, the power of the Babylonian king over his subjects was absolute and unlimited, with each succeeding kingdom showing a decrease in this regard. It is highly questionable whether such a criterion would justify the idea that the successive metals indicate a decreasing value of the four empires. In any case, such a decrease is simply not a fact. The power of the Babylonian king was really far from absolute. Hundreds of clay tablets from the time of Nebuchadnezzar have been excavated, containing contracts and other arrangements made by private citizens during his reign. Many centuries before the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Hammurabi, one of the greatest of Babylonian kings, had erected a monument containing a detailed and extensive code of laws. In its preamble he declared that these laws had been given him by the sun god, and that he was displaying them so that every person should be able to read the laws and know his rights. This and other evidence shows clearly that the Babylonian kings were far from being absolute rulers, though their power was very great.

The same is true of the Persian rulers. The book of Esther describes King Ahasuerus as simply making an edict on his own motion that would turn over the Jews to be destroyed by the peoples among whom they lived (Est. 3:11-15). This would seem to be a sign of absolute power. Yet once the date for this purge had been set there was no way that the king could change it (Est. 8:8, cf. Dan. 6:15). All he could do was to make a counteracting law, giving the Jews the right to defend themselves, and providing them with some help for this purpose. The Persian empire may have been slightly more totalitarian than the Babylonian or slightly less, but there is certainly no sign of decreasing value in this regard.

A few years after the death of Alexander, the Greek empire had become divided into three main parts and a number of smaller sections, all of them characterized by the