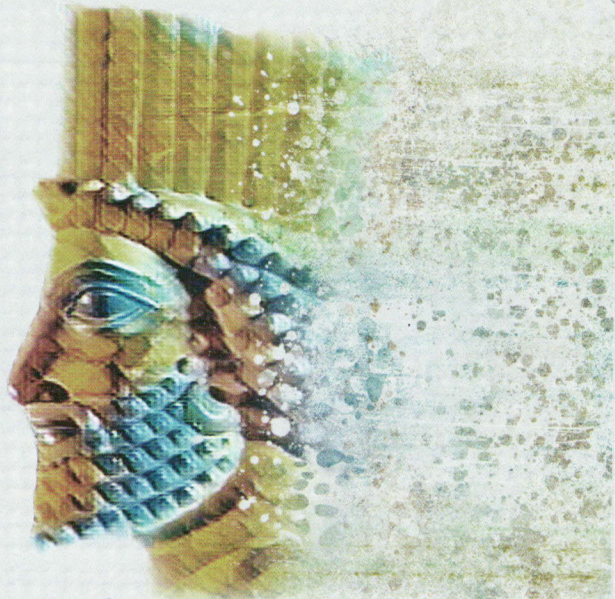


HOW BELSHAZZAR WAS DELETED FROM HISTORY AND WHO DID IT

RODGER C. YOUNG



According to the book of Daniel, chapter 5, a certain Belshazzar was the king of Babylon when the city fell to the armies of Media, Persia, and their allies, thus ending the Neo-Babylonian Empire. For many years Belshazzar was a puzzle to historians and commentators on the Scripture because his name was not found in any ancient documents outside of the book of Daniel and works dependent on it. Early sources such as Berossus and Claudius Ptolemy mention Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon. Over a period of more than two thousand years, no writers could be found that specified Belshazzar as the last king of Babylon except Josephus and the apocryphal Book of Baruch, both of which derived the name from the biblical account.

Faced with this fact, skeptical scholars unsurprisingly denied the historicity of Daniel's references to Belshazzar. Biblical commentators who held to a high view of inspiration, and who were familiar with the ancient sources, generally took the path of assuming that Belshazzar was an alternate name for one of the historically attested last Neo-Babylonian kings. Thus, Josephus in the first century AD (*Ant.* 10.231, 10.11.2) and Jerome in the fifth century (*Commentary on Daniel*, ca. AD 407) identified him as Nabonidus, as did Archbishop Ussher in his *Histories of the World* (17th century) and Carl Friedrich Keil in the Keil and Delitzsch OT commentaries (1860s).

Subsequent to the appearance of the Keil and Delitzsch commentaries, Otto Zöckler published, in 1870, his commentary on Daniel in the original German edition of Johann Peter Lange's commentary. Zöckler recognized that it had become difficult to defend the identification of Nabonidus with Belshazzar. He cited evidence from Berossus, as quoted in Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.149–153, 1.20), and also from Abydenus, as quoted by Eusebius (*Preparation of the Gospel* 9.40, 9.41), that Nabonidus was not killed when Babylon was taken, but that Cyrus made him governor of Carmania. As further evidence against equating Nabonidus with Belshazzar, Zöckler noted that ancient authors and inscriptions describe Nabonidus as a usurper who was not of royal descent, and that therefore he was not a "son" of Nebuchadnezzar II, as reiterated for Belshazzar in Daniel 5:11 (three times), 5:13, 5:18, and 5:22.

Various alternatives have been offered in order to explain why Belshazzar is called the son of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 5. They all rely on the fact that the terms *father* and *son* in Semitic usage convey a broader meaning than in English. The Hebrew and Aramaic words for *son* frequently mean *descendant* (Jesus is called the son of David in Matthew 20:30 and 20:31), and Matthew 3:9 shows that *father* can mean any male ancestor. In the ancient Near East the terms could be even broader than that, with *father* signifying *predecessor* and *son* meaning *successor*. An example of this latter usage is found on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III, where Jehu is called a son of Omri, even though Jehu had killed all the descendants of Omri. Another instance of this, even more pertinent because it comes exactly from the time of Daniel, is when Nebuchadnezzar calls Naram-Sin, an Akkadian king whose reign some scholars put in the 23rd century BC, his "ancient father" (a-ba-a-am labéri), using the Akkadian cognate for the Aramaic *ab* (father) in Daniel 5.¹ This latter option is favored by Andrew Steinmann in his commentary,² while J. Paul Tanner advocates that Belshazzar's mother was the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, so that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's maternal grandfather.³ With the present state of knowledge, any of these options would explain why Belshazzar is called the son of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 5, and all are compatible with ancient Near Eastern usage.

The critics, then, are in error when they claim there is no evidence (the Bible not being accepted as evidence) that Belshazzar could be called the son of Nebuchadnezzar in any sense. Similar bad logic is exhibited by those who seek to disparage the Bible by arguing that contract texts during Belshazzar's tenure were dated to his father's reign, or that Belshazzar did not officiate at the annual New Year's Festival, and so the Bible is wrong when it calls Belshazzar a king (as are Herodotus and Xenophon; see below). But the critics have no problem with Cambyses I of Persia being a sub-king under Astyages, king of Media and hence not having all the prerogatives of his Median overlord. These critics' positions are basically losing arguments that can be described by that good English word *sophistry*.



The Cylinder of Nebuchadnezzar II, created ca. 580 BC, was discovered in an ancient Babylonian temple at Wana Sadoum (Marad). It is 8.5" in height with an 18" diameter and is actually a truncated hollow cone of fine clay burned at such a high temperature it resembles a stone. In the text of the cylinder, Nebuchadnezzar identifies himself as a favorite of the gods and as the firstborn son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon. The cylinder also notes that Nebuchadnezzar's diggers uncovered the foundation of the ancient temple and an inscription of Naram-Sin (2255–2218 BC). This inscription, on a flat, circular piece of marble (likely as the doorpost socket at the temple entrance), was already thousands of years old at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Naram-Sin was the grandson of Sargon the Akkad, or Sargon the Great.

But let us return to Zöckler's dilemma: In what looks like desperation, he equated Belshazzar with Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk). But this position was also untenable, since Amel-Marduk, son of Nebuchadnezzar II, reigned from 562 to 560 BC, well before the fall of Babylon in 539 BC. Further, Claudius Ptolemy's list of Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Persian, and later kings from 747 BC to AD 150 (Ptolemy's time), which has been proven accurate at many places in its list of kings, the lengths of their reigns, and astronomical events associated with them, shows Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon, followed immediately by Cyrus of Persia.

Zöckler can be forgiven for ignoring Ptolemy's *Canon*, since the evidence from ancient astronomical and other inscriptions and modern astronomy's confirmation of the accuracy of these observations were largely the result of later scholarship. Nevertheless, the situation in 1870 looked difficult for those who held to the divine inspiration of the Bible. How could the Bible be inspired in any meaningful sense if it was wrong in such major areas as the names of ancient kings, the fates of their kingdoms, and the timing of related events? The evidence against the historical accuracy of the book of Daniel therefore appeared formidable: Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon, followed immediately by Cyrus the Persian. There was no such person as Belshazzar; no evidence for this name existed outside the Bible and literature derived from it. Even the idea that Belshazzar was an alternate name for Nabonidus could not explain the sources that testified that Nabonidus was not

killed on the night that Babylon fell to the Medes and Persians, as was the Babylonian king of Daniel 5. Instead, the king of Babylon survived for some time afterward in Carmania, according to Berossus/Josephus and Abydenus/Eusebius.

The position of the critics therefore seemed well established: Belshazzar and the whole scenario of his banquet and the "handwriting on the wall" were the invention of a second-century BC author who wanted to teach spiritual truth by inventing a fictitious story. Any sixth-century BC author would have gotten the names of the Babylonian kings right. The "assured results" of modern criticism had established that Belshazzar never existed and that the book of Daniel could not be trusted as a historical source.

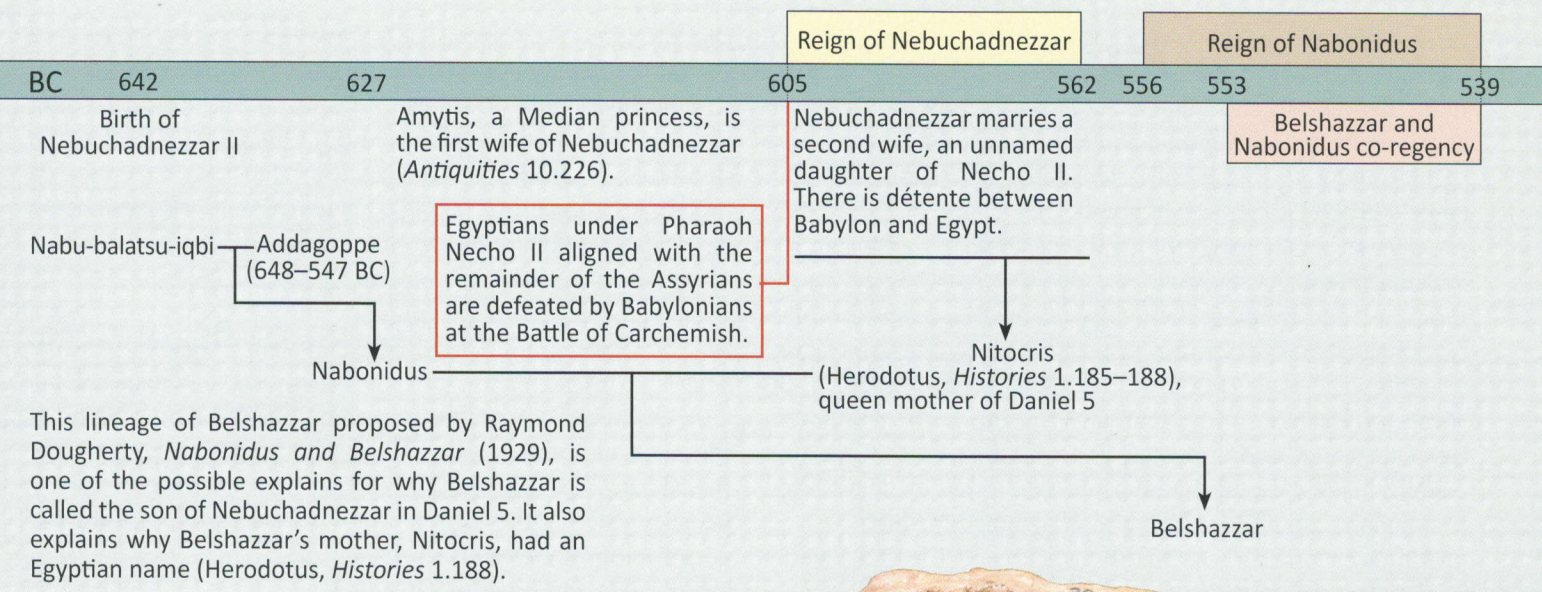
A BREAKTHROUGH FROM ARCHAEOLOGY

It was Zöckler himself, in his writing on Daniel in Lange's commentary, who gave a glimpse of the surprise that solved this perplexing problem. The solution came from cuneiform texts from Iraq (Mesopotamia) and Arabia that were undergoing translation at the time he was writing his commentary. Here is what Zöckler wrote after promoting his own mistaken theory that Belshazzar = Amel-Marduk:

The fact that the name Belshazzar occurs as belonging to Chaldean kings is substantially established by the notice deciphered on the cylinders of Mugheir by Oppert and Rawlinson, which refers to a "Belsarussur [Belshazzar], son of Nabomit or Nabumtuk [Nabonidus]"...although the identity of this Belsarussur with the Belshazzar of Daniel, which is asserted by Rawlinson and Pusey (*Daniel the Prophet*, p. 402 [*sic*; should be 405]), appears to be highly improbable, since this son of Nabonidus cannot be shown to have been either of royal rank nor descended from Nebuchadnezzar.⁴

As is now universally accepted, Rawlinson and Pusey were right, and it was Zöckler who failed to recognize the significance of this text and others that came from the court of Nabonidus. Other inscriptions were found in which Nabonidus names Belshazzar as his firstborn son. Equally important, Belshazzar could properly be called king, since Nabonidus had appointed him to reign in Babylon while he himself reigned in Tema, Arabia:

He [Nabonidus] entrusted the "Camp" to his oldest (son) [Belshazzar, from other texts], the firstborn...He let (everything) go, entrusted the kingship to him [Belshazzar] and himself [Nabonidus], he started out for a long journey, the (military) forces of Akkad marching with him; He turned towards Tema (deep) in the west...He made the town beautiful, built (there) [his palace] like the palace in Šu . an . na (Babylon).⁵



THE NAME BELSHAZZAR HAD DISAPPEARED FROM HISTORY, EXCEPT AS DERIVED FROM THE BIBLE, IN THE SECOND CENTURY BC AND EARLIER

The new information, which has continually grown since the late 19th century, showed that it was the critics—and indeed all scholars, conservative and nonconservative alike—who were uninformed, not the author of Daniel chapter 5. Andrew Steinmann summarizes the significance of the new evidence:

Beginning in the 1860s, Babylonian sources came to light that named Belshazzar as the son of Nabonidus. They also stated that Belshazzar was made coregent over Babylon. These texts vindicated the historical nature of Daniel's account. Furthermore, since these texts had been buried and forgotten and all memory of Belshazzar had been lost to history outside of the Bible and works dependent on it, they furnished proof positive that the writer of Daniel 5 must have been a contemporary who lived during the events recorded in the chapter. Since writers in later centuries, including writers during the Maccabean era, would have had no knowledge of Belshazzar based on the forgotten Babylonian texts, Daniel 5 could not have been composed in later centuries, disproving the long-held critical view that Daniel was written during the Maccabean era.⁶

The critics, therefore, were wrong in their assertion that the author of Daniel made a historical blunder regarding the last kings of Babylon. Despite their error about the existence of Belshazzar, negative critics of the book of Daniel have continued to argue for a second-century BC date for much of if not all the book of Daniel. But if Daniel (particularly chapter 5) were composed at that time, then from what source did its author derive his information about Belshazzar? Current scholarship cannot name any classical authors from the second century BC who give the name of the last Babylonian king as *Belshazzar*.



The Verse Account of Nabonidus showed that Nabonidus had a son named Belshazzar, whom Nabonidus “entrusted the kingship to” so that Nabonidus could reign in Arabia while Belshazzar reigned in Babylon. The finding of this text dispelled over two thousand years of doubt about the existence of Belshazzar except as possibly another name for Nabonidus. It also showed that Belshazzar was actually reigning in Babylon when the book of Daniel says he was. The Verse Account is universally recognized as a propaganda text, produced by the Persian rulers, that pretends to be entirely by Nabonidus. Nevertheless, its relation of events related to Belshazzar is generally accepted as copied from an authentic record of Nabonidus. Despite the witness of the Verse Account to Belshazzar being appointed as sub-king in Babylon, critics who seek to disparage the Bible's correctly calling him the king of Babylon (and thus refuting their second-century BC date of authorship of Daniel) resort to various gymnastics to say that he was not king in any real sense and that the book of Daniel was wrong in giving this title.

The dilemma for the critics goes even further back in time. Herodotus, who wrote his *Histories* around 430 BC, does not name Belshazzar, although, as we shall see later, he passes on some relevant information about him, including the name of his mother (*Hist.* 1.188). Herodotus also records (1.191) some specific information about the fall of Babylon: that it occurred on the night of a festival (agreeing with Dn 5:1) and that the invading army was able to enter the city via the riverbed after diverting the Euphrates for that purpose. Other early historians (except for Xenophon; see below) were even less informed than Herodotus, showing no knowledge at all about the existence of Belshazzar. Why this curious omission by ancient authors of references to Belshazzar, the one that Nabonidus “entrusted the kingship to” so that he could reign in Babylon while Nabonidus himself reigned in Tema?

Although other early historians did not know the name *Belshazzar*, the author of Daniel not only knew his name but correctly described him as reigning in Babylon when the city was captured in 539 BC. Critics had cited the lack of reference to Belshazzar except as given in the book of Daniel and works dependent on it as evidence that the book must have been written much later than the events it describes. But then things were turned on their head: even as early as the time of Herodotus (fifth century BC), the name *Belshazzar* had apparently been forgotten. No source could be named from which a second-century BC writer would know this name unless it was a source that must be dated before the fifth century BC. Only one source is currently known that satisfies this dilemma: the book of Daniel, as written in the sixth century BC by someone who was well informed on events related to the closing days of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Despite being unable to produce any credible source outside the book of Daniel that would be available to a second-century BC “pseudo-Daniel,” critics, especially those whose anti-supernatural presuppositions ruled out *a priori* any consideration that the prophecies of Daniel could be authentic, clung to their theories. Thus Carol Newsom assures us regarding Daniel chapter 5 that “the story is historical fiction that uses sometimes distorted memories of events to construct an alternative narrative about the end of the Babylonian Empire.”⁷ She offers no explanation of where the “distorted memories” came from. Why is the book of Daniel, which Jewish and Christian tradition has always assigned to the sixth century, automatically ruled out as a source? Instead, the “distorted memories of events,” for which Newsom can offer no tangible evidence, are presented as the origin of Daniel chapter 5. Why exclude the very real evidence of the existence of the chapter itself? Why exclude the evidence that it is from the sixth century—such as the author remembering correctly the name of Belshazzar and the fact that he was actually reigning in Babylon when it fell to the Medes and Persians? Even historians who are always ready to dismiss the Bible when it speaks of historical matters have now accepted the testimony of the “Verse Account” and other cuneiform texts

that show that Belshazzar really was reigning in Babylon when the book of Daniel says he was. For such historians, it is as if a biblical text will not be believed until a non-biblical account is found that verifies it. They cling to this method despite the numerous findings from archaeology that have verified that the Bible is accurate in places where skeptical scholarship previously would not accept the Bible’s narrative of events.

HERODOTUS’S IMPERFECT REMEMBRANCE OF BELSHAZZAR

In the above discussion it was emphasized that, outside of the book of Daniel and writings dependent on it, the name *Belshazzar* had apparently been lost—erased from history—from as early as the fifth century BC (Herodotus) until the deciphering of cuneiform texts in the latter half of the 19th century AD. In *Histories* 1.188, however, Herodotus passes on some useful information about Belshazzar—information that is often overlooked because of the difficulty in interpreting this passage. In the preceding sections, 1.185–87, Herodotus relates the exploits of a queen (*basileia*) of Babylon named Nitocris. He then says, in 1.188, the following about events leading up to the capture of Babylon: “Cyrus, then, marched against Nitocris’ son, who inherited the name of his father Labynetus, and the sovereignty of Assyria [Herodotus’s usual name for Babylonia].” Regarding the name *Labynetus*, Paul-Alain Beaulieu writes, “There is no problem in assuming that the form ‘Labynetus’ goes back to the Akkadian name Nabû-nā’id, since Herodotus refers twice to Nabonidus the king by the same name.”⁸ So, according to Herodotus, there were two rulers of Babylon, father and son, who bore the same name, usually assumed to be the name *Labynetus* (i.e., Nabonidus). One of the two was definitely Nabonidus, father of Belshazzar, but is Nabonidus the first or the second Labynetus in the Herodotus passage?

Many authorities believe that he is the second (i.e., Labynetus II) in this passage, and that Labynetus I is Nebuchadnezzar; this view came about because of an earlier reference to Labynetus (Nabonidus) in Herodotus. Zöckler⁹ and others who held to this interpretation relied on *Histories* 1.74, where Labynetus is the mediator of a peace settlement between the warring Medes and Lydians after both sides in the conflict had been alarmed by the solar eclipse of May 28, 585 BC. Since this event was during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605 to 562 BC), Nebuchadnezzar was assumed to be the monarch that Herodotus identifies as the first Labynetus. Taking this view would mean that Herodotus was mistaken in saying that Nabonidus / Labynetus II was the son of Nebuchadnezzar / Labynetus I, because it is known from Herodotus’s own writings that Nabonidus was not a son or grandson of Nebuchadnezzar.

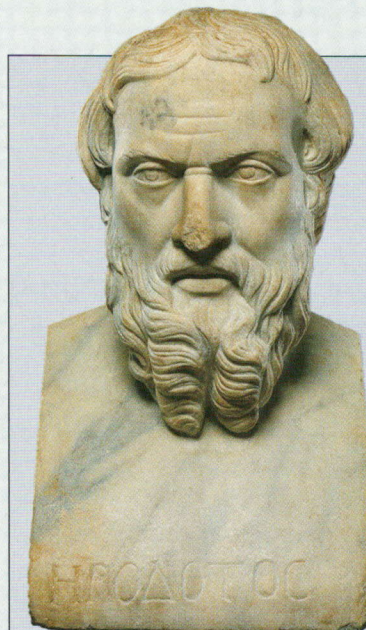
Raymond Dougherty provides a better solution in his excellent monograph *Nabonidus and Belshazzar*: Labynetus I was Nabonidus and Labynetus II was his son, Belshazzar.¹⁰ Dougherty presents documentation showing that Nabonidus,

in 585 BC, was of high standing in the government under Nebuchadnezzar, and that, due to his high standing, Nebuchadnezzar appointed him as his representative who would mediate between the warring Medes and Lydians. In *Histories* 1.74 he is not called “king” during this time of mediation, but “Labynetus of Babylon.” This would be a highly unusual designation if the Labynetus in this passage were Nebuchadnezzar, in which case we should instead expect the title “Labynetus, king of Babylon.” Therefore the Labynetus of 1.74 is Nabonidus, the official of high standing chosen by Nebuchadnezzar to mediate the peace treaty. At a later time, after Nebuchadnezzar died and Nabonidus/Labynetus had begun to reign, Herodotus called him the “sovereign” of Babylon (1.77), and he is the Labynetus I of 1.188, with Labynetus II being his son Belshazzar.

Once this understanding of the father-and-son passage in Herodotus is accepted, additional information can be gleaned from the first sentence of *Histories* 1.188: that both father and son were called kings, that the son was reigning after Cyrus defeated the Lydians in 547 BC and was the one against whom Cyrus marched, and that his mother (Nabonidus’s wife) was named Nitocris. *Nitocris* was an Egyptian name common at the time in Egypt; as an example, it was the name of the sister of Necho II (reigned 610–595 BC). Dougherty has much more to say about the other Nitocris (not Necho’s sister), the queen that Herodotus (1.185–87) says was active in fortifying Babylon shortly before its capture by Cyrus the Great. Dougherty, in addressing the issue of her Egyptian name, explains that it is reasonable to assume that she was a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, with an Egyptian princess as her mother. Perhaps Dougherty’s insights regarding Nitocris will be explained, and defended, in a future article explaining also why she is the queen mother of Daniel chapter 5.

XENOPHON’S IMPERFECT REMEMBRANCE OF BELSHAZZAR

Another Greek author, Xenophon, also preserves some pertinent information about Belshazzar without giving his name. Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* (*Education of Cyrus*) was written around 370 BC. Xenophon’s information in this regard, though sparse, is consistent with various details about Belshazzar as related in the book of Daniel, chapter 5. Xenophon relates the attempts of Cyrus the Great to gain allies for the impending attack on the city of Babylon. Among those he gained to his side were two governors who had been wronged by the (unnamed) king who was reigning in Babylon. These allies that Cyrus gained to his side were Gadatas, governor of a territory that is not named, and Gobryas (Akkadian *Gubaru*), governor of the Gutians, who some scholars think may be ancestors of the modern-day Kurds.¹¹ Cyrus describes the Babylonian king who had wronged Gadatas and Gobryas as “this young fellow who has just come to the throne” (*Cyr.* 5.2.27). He is repeatedly given the title of “king” in the *Cyropaedia*, in agreement with



Herodotus, ca. 484 to ca. 425 BC. He wrote his *Histories* around 430 BC, preserving a rather clouded memory of Belshazzar. In *Histories* 1.188 he said that the final two kings of Babylon were father and son, naming one of them as Labynetus (Nabonidus). He also named the wife of Labynetus/Nabonidus (and mother of the younger king) as “Nitocris,” an Egyptian name. Herodotus’s *Histories* agrees with Daniel 5 in saying that Babylon fell to

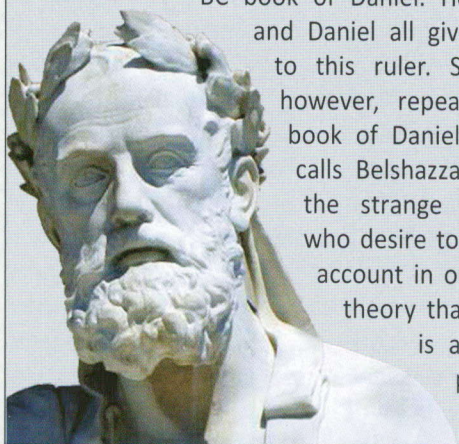
the armies under Cyrus at the time of a festival, and that the younger king was reigning in Babylon at the time. Herodotus said the younger king had the same name as his father; this is found in no other source, although kings at that time usually had a given name and a throne name. Apparently all memory of the name *Belshazzar* had been wiped out before 430 BC, except as found in the book of Daniel, which therefore must have been written before the time of Herodotus.

the book of Daniel and with the Verse Account of Nabonidus (cited above). In spite of this, various critics continue in their opinion that the book of Daniel is mistaken in calling Belshazzar a king; among them is John J. Collins, who writes, “The fact remains that there is no evidence to corroborate the claim of Daniel 5 that Belshazzar was king in any sense at the time of the fall of Babylon.”¹²

By the time that Xenophon wrote the *Cyropaedia*, either he or his Persian informants (he had spent time as a Greek mercenary in Persia) had apparently forgotten the name of the king who was reigning in Babylon in 539 BC. Also, Xenophon definitely had wrong information about Belshazzar’s father, saying he had been slain before the attack on Babylon. Dougherty writes the following regarding this error in Xenophon: “With limited data at his [Xenophon’s] disposal, he would naturally look upon the father of Belshazzar as no longer living when the latter was exercising the powers of a ruler in Babylonia.”¹³ Nevertheless, Xenophon is correct in having the “young fellow” reigning in Babylon when it was besieged by the forces under Cyrus.

Cyrus was fighting elsewhere and did not enter the city until 17 days after it fell.¹⁴ He had committed the leadership of the invading forces to Gadatas and Gobryas/Gubaru. According to the *Cyropaedia*, the invading army took advantage of the fact that “a certain festival had come round in Babylon, during which all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long” (*Cyr.* 7.5.15). Herodotus affirms that it was the time of a festival (*Hist.* 1.191). In this regard both accounts

A modern statue of Xenophon in Vienna, Austria. Xenophon (ca. 428 to 354 BC) was a Greek general and author who obtained his information related to the fall of Babylon during the time he served as a mercenary to Cyrus the Younger (great-great grandson of Darius I) in an unsuccessful effort to capture the throne of Persia from Cyrus's brother Artaxerxes II. The struggle is described in Xenophon's most famous work, the *Anabasis*. His *Cyropaedia* (*Education of Cyrus*), written around 370 BC, is an idealized portrait of Cyrus the Great, but many of its historical details are verified from other sources. The *Cyropaedia* relates that Babylon was taken on the night of a festival, agreeing with Herodotus and Daniel 5:1. It further relates that the "young fellow" who was reigning in Babylon at that time was slain on that very night, agreeing with Daniel 5. But Xenophon, like Herodotus, did not know the name of the young man, showing again that the name *Belshazzar* was lost to classical authors but was preserved in the sixth-century



BC book of Daniel. Herodotus, Xenophon, and Daniel all give the title of "king" to this ruler. Skeptical scholarship, however, repeatedly says that the book of Daniel is in error when it calls Belshazzar a king; this shows the strange reasoning of those who desire to discredit the biblical account in order to support their theory that the book of Daniel is a second-century BC pious fraud, at least in its prophetic parts.

are in agreement with chapter 5 of Daniel, which describes Belshazzar as participating in a banquet when the city was taken. However, only Xenophon records that Babylon's king was slain on that very night. He relates that, while the forces under Gadatas and Gobryas were "dealing blows right and left they came into the presence of the king; and they found him already risen with his dagger in his hand. And Gadatas and Gobryas and their followers overpowered him; and those about the king perished also" (*Cyr.* 7.5.29–31). Xenophon's reference to the importance of Gobryas (Gubaru) is borne out by the Babylonian Chronicle (*ANET*, 306b), which relates that Gobryas commanded the army that entered the city on 16 Tishri (October 12), 539 BC, but then he died on the 11th day of the next month, Heshvan—i.e., November 6.

Consequently, Xenophon agrees with the book of Daniel on these key points: the city was involved in a festival when it was invaded by the besieging army, the one ruling in Babylon at that time was called a king, and the king was slain on the night of the feast. Xenophon's account is obviously not the source of Daniel chapter 5, and, conversely, no one would contend that Xenophon derived his history from the book of Daniel. Because these sources are independent, the agreement on these details

shows that Persian sources (Xenophon's Persian informants) add credibility to the Bible's account. This should be seriously weighed by those who are unwilling to accept anything in the Bible unless it can be verified from other sources.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EXPUNGING BELSHAZZAR FROM HISTORY?

As was mentioned above, the finding and translating of cuneiform texts from the time of Nabonidus confirmed not only the existence of Belshazzar as Nabonidus's firstborn son, but that he had appointed Belshazzar as ruler in Babylon while he himself stayed in Tema. But by the time of Herodotus, apparently the name *Belshazzar* was no longer known, except among the Hebrews who had the book of Daniel in their possession. This removal of Belshazzar from accounts relating to the closing days of the Neo-Babylonian Empire is so definite that it had to have been a deliberate policy, enacted by a person or persons who had the authority to rewrite history. So who was responsible for this early propaganda effort that changed the written history by deleting any mention of such an important figure?

First, the government of the Persian Empire that succeeded Nabonidus and Belshazzar had to have been complicit in the erasure of Belshazzar, because Claudius Ptolemy derived his list of kings of the time ultimately from official state records of Persia. It follows that those responsible for the state records must have been involved in a deliberate attempt to erase the remembrance of Belshazzar. That is, the highest officials of the Persian Empire were complicit in this early example of fake news.

Further light on what happened has come from various studies in recent years that have led to the conclusion that, soon after the fateful events of 539 BC, there was a massive and deliberate campaign by the victorious Persians to write their explanation of recent history, an explanation that would make it appear that it was the will of Marduk (the chief Babylonian god) that the Persians should rule in Babylon. The campaign was widespread, again indicating that it was the product of official Persian policy. Documents from the Persian period that reflect this policy include the Verse Account of Nabonidus (*ANET*, 312b–15a), the Nabonidus Chronicle (*ANET*, 305b–307a), the Dream Text of Nabonidus,¹⁵ and the Cyrus Cylinder (*ANET*, 315b–16b). All these texts name Nabonidus and present him in an unfavorable light; none of them names Belshazzar. The charge against Nabonidus was that he abandoned the worship of Marduk in favor of worshipping the moon god Sin. This accusation against Nabonidus because of his neglect of the worship of Marduk seems justified from what Nabonidus himself wrote (or commissioned) in documents from his time such as the Harran Stela (*ANET*, 562a–63b).

Besides their omission of Belshazzar, the purpose of which will be explained shortly, there was another propaganda technique utilized by the Persian authorities. In some of the texts, such as the Dream Text, the account was written as if it were commissioned by Nabonidus. In order to accomplish

this deceit, the starting place of the texts was a genuine inscription from Nabonidus, written in the first person. An example of this is in the Verse Account, where Nabonidus tells of his building a temple for his god and then “entrust[ing] the kingship” of Babylon to his son Belshazzar. But then the Verse Account goes on to praise Cyrus, “the king of the world whose tri[umph(s) are true] And [whose yoke] the kings of all the countries are pulli[ng].”¹⁶ To the modern reader this may seem like a fairly crude attempt to rewrite history—to do so by producing a document that pretends to come from a hostile source (Nabonidus) but that presents the propagandist’s (Cyrus’s) viewpoint.

A similar ploy was used in the Dream Text (also called the Sippar Cylinder) where, in the midst of text that reads as if it represents the original words of Nabonidus, there appears the statement “when the third year arrived, he (Marduk) aroused Cyrus, king of Anshan, his young servant...”¹⁷ The propaganda obviously had the people of Babylon as its intended audience. Not only is Cyrus praised instead of being presented as a feared and hated enemy (as we would expect from any genuine text of Nabonidus), but Cyrus is also shown as favored by Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonians. In the legible portions of the Dream Text there is no mention of Belshazzar, despite his inclusion in many inscriptions that, unlike the Dream Text, are genuinely from the time of Nabonidus.

It is generally accepted that the Nabonidus Chronicle is the most objective of these texts from the Persian records of 539 BC and later. Belshazzar is not named in the Chronicle, although there is reference to him by the title “the crown prince.” But evidence that this text also reflects the Persian party line is shown in its repeated relating of how Nabonidus neglected ceremonies related to the worship of Marduk—ceremonies that, according to the rewrite of history contained in the Cyrus Cylinder, were restored when Cyrus entered Babylon “without any battle...as a friend.”¹⁸ The Cylinder is, rather obviously, a propagandistic effort to manipulate public opinion and give legitimacy to Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon and his subsequent rule. There is general agreement that the Cylinder was commissioned by Cyrus himself in the period between the capture of Babylon and his death in 530 BC. That being the case, the Cylinder provides the earliest example of the expunging of Belshazzar, whom we would expect to find playing a prominent role in the momentous events related to the taking of the city. Yet Belshazzar is not mentioned by name in either of the two exemplars of the Cylinder that have been found, and the only possible allusion to him is found in the opening lines that speak of a “weakling” or “low and unworthy man.” Some scholars think the reference is to Nabonidus, others to Belshazzar.¹⁹ Whether or not the person who is vilified at the beginning of the text is Belshazzar, the failure to recognize Belshazzar as reigning in Babylon when the city was taken, or even to give his name, must be taken as a deliberate strategy to remove him from this and the subsequent Persian narrative of the history of the time. The Cyrus Cylinder shows

that the initiator of this expunging of Belshazzar from history was Cyrus himself.

But why? The answer is given in Steven Anderson’s breakthrough PhD dissertation dealing with the Medes and Persians at the time of, and just preceding, the fall of Babylon in 539 BC.²⁰ Anderson points out that in all the Persian propaganda, Nabonidus is presented in an unfavorable light because of his abandonment of the worship of Marduk. But such a charge could not have been leveled against Belshazzar, who was a faithful devotee of Babylon’s chief god. The solution of the Persian propagandists: expunge Belshazzar from history. The instigator of this historical rewrite was Cyrus the Great himself, as evidenced in the Cyrus Cylinder that he commissioned. The Cylinder apparently was copied and distributed in various places, since two exemplars have been found and archaeology only recovers a small portion of ancient inscriptions; most of them are permanently lost or not yet found. The efforts of Cyrus and his successors to eliminate any remembrance of the Marduk-worshipping Belshazzar from history are responsible for the conundrum described at the beginning of the present article: For over two millennia either the existence of Belshazzar, as given in Daniel 5, was disputed, or he was incorrectly identified with someone else, usually his father, Nabonidus. The only source that was known that correctly gave the name of who was reigning in Babylon when it fell to the Medes and Persians was the biblical book of Daniel (and works derived from it).

Critical scholarship has not been able to explain how their second-century BC pseudo-Daniel could have obtained his information about specific personalities and incidents that happened in the sixth century BC. Instead there is surmising about “sometimes distorted memories of events” as the source of what turns out to be historically accurate data. No tangible evidence is supplied for the existence of documents that could have been the basis for these distorted memories. But such documents must be postulated in order to maintain the critics’ anti-supernatural interpretation of the book of Daniel, an interpretation that *a priori* rules out the possibility of truly predictive prophecy.

Daniel lived long enough to see God’s mercy to His people when Cyrus, in his first year of rule, issued a decree for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem (Ezr 1:1; Dn 6:28). Subsequent Persian kings also showed kindness to those who returned from the Babylonian Exile. Thus, during the reign of Darius I (522–486 BC), the actual construction of the Temple was begun and completed (Hg 1:14, 1:15; Ezr 3:8, 6:15). Darius’s grandson Artaxerxes must have granted permission for Ezra to start rebuilding the wall in Jerusalem in 458 BC, as this is demonstrated by the complaints to Artaxerxes by Judah’s enemies that Jerusalem’s wall was being restored (Ezr 4:13, 4:16). Because of the complaints, the work was interrupted until Artaxerxes’s twentieth year, 445 BC, at which time Nehemiah, who turned out to be a very capable administrator, received permission to finish the wall (Neh 2:1–8).

But the troubles of these times under Persian rule pale in comparison with what happened when the Persian Empire was succeeded by the Grecian. After the death of Alexander (323 BC), his dominion was divided among four of his generals. This is described in Daniel 7:6, where the third beast (third kingdom) is represented as a leopard—a swift beast—with four wings, representing the fourfold division of the empire after Alexander's death. This fourfold division of the Grecian empire in Daniel's prophecies is also portrayed in chapter 8, verse 8, where after the death of Alexander (the prominent horn of 8:5), this third kingdom is depicted as being divided among four prominent horns. The horns were General Cassander, over Macedonia and Greece; Lysimachus, over Thrace and Asia Minor; Seleucus, over Syria and Mesopotamia; and Ptolemy, over Egypt.

The latter two of these and their successors are the "kings of the north" and the "kings of the south" that figure prominently in the prophecies of Daniel 11. Conservative and nonconservative commentators alike recognize that the conflicts of these factions, and their adverse effect on Judea, are described in meticulous detail in chapter 11. Throughout the third century BC and until the victories of Judah under the Maccabees ("Hammers") in 164 BC, God's people suffered much as they were caught in the middle of the conflict between these warring kingdoms. The strife lasted throughout the third century BC and into the first four decades of the second, during which time the inhabitants of Judah could well ask, with Job, why God would allow such suffering for His people.

But God showed His grace in the midst of the suffering in the following way: The book of Daniel was available, and those who had faith instead of skepticism about what God had revealed in His Word could examine chapter 11 and see that, although at the latter end of the strife there would be a desecration of the Temple (Dn 11:31), nevertheless at that time "the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action" (the Maccabean Revolt), "and the wise among the people shall make many understand" (Dn 11:32b, 11:33a). What could better accomplish imparting understanding to the people than reading to them the prophecy of these things in the book of Daniel?

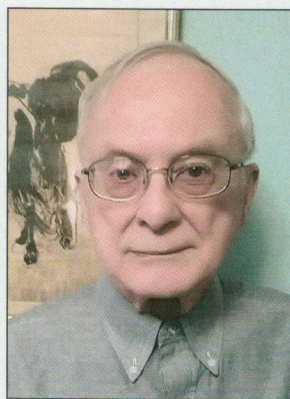
WHY ANTI-SUPERNATURAL CRITICS REJECT ALL THIS

None of this is allowed by those who approach the Bible from an anti-supernatural viewpoint. To them, the fact that the prophecies of chapter 7 jump from the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes to an end-times period of tribulation and the final judgment (Dn 7:9–17) means that they, with great confidence, can assert that this division point gives us the time that the prophetic parts of Daniel, including chapter 11 with its painstaking detail, must have been composed. All is *vaticinium ex eventu*—a carefully crafted pseudo-prophecy that was written after, not before, the events described. The book of Daniel, say the critics, was composed

in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes for a second-century audience by a deceiver who had the supposedly noble goal of encouraging his people during the dark days of Antiochus's desecrations. He accomplished this goal by producing a work that the critics can praise for its teaching of an ahistorical spiritual truth—but to produce this truth, the critics' pseudo-Daniel used lies as his chief technique.

This approach to Daniel is governed not by evidence such as that which is presented in the present article and by numerous conservative commentators, but by the critics' starting presupposition that predictive prophecy is impossible. Impossible because either (1) God does not exist, (2) He may exist, but He does not know the future, or (3) He may know the future, but He is either unwilling to impart or incapable of imparting such knowledge to His servants. Those who continue to hold to these presuppositions will never be convinced by evidence—whether produced by archaeology or any other source—that contradicts their unfalsifiable position, a position not based on evidence, as in the scientific worldview, but based on a sub-Christian (and sub-faithful-Jewish) view of God and His providence.

The present study is written for those not committed to this anti-supernatural worldview, and also for those who hold it but are open to considering the reasons they should become more philosophically sound in their thinking. For reasonable people like this, it is important that good archaeology be carried out to continue to add to the evidence supporting the sixth-century date for the composition of Daniel, as well as to reinforce the credibility of other historical parts of the Bible. Those involved in this work are an important part of God's plan in demonstrating the truthfulness of His Word to anyone of an open mind. The purpose of the present article has been to show how archaeological findings related to the career of Belshazzar have added to that goal. The next article in this series will use the same approach in showing how archaeological findings, and the proper interpretation of ancient texts, do the same in corroborating the existence and identity of Darius the Mede, whom the critics regard as a figment of their pseudo-Daniel's imagination or as a mistaken remembrance of Darius I (reigned 522 to 486 BC).



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ADDENDUM

(Footnotes and bibliography follow)

WHEN WERE CYRUS'S YEARS ONE AND THREE?

RODGER C. YOUNG

The vision of the last three chapters of the book of Daniel is dated to the third year of the reign of Cyrus (Dn 10:1). A question naturally arises: What was that year in terms of our calendar? For secular sources, the answer is simple: The Babylonian Chronicle dates the capture of Babylon by the forces under Cyrus to October 12, 539 BC. Cyrus himself entered the city 17 days later. If this is the beginning of his reign over Babylon (and if we disregard his rule as king of the Persians before capturing Babylon), then, according to the Nisan-based calendar used by both the Babylonians and Persians, this would have been the calendar year that started in Nisan of 539 BC. The Babylonians and Persians reckoned the first partial year of a king's reign as his "zero" year (Akkadian *resh sharruti*), and the king's year one would then begin on Nisan one of the next calendar year. Therefore, if Cyrus's reigning as king of Babylon is reckoned from October or November of 539 BC, his year three was the year that began in Nisan of 536 BC.

The problem with this calculation is that Daniel 5:30 says that the one who took over the kingdom after the death of Belshazzar was a certain Darius "the Mede." A natural reading of the text would therefore have the reign of Darius the Mede intervening between the reigns of Belshazzar and Cyrus. Furthermore, Darius must have reigned from the October 539 fall of Babylon until at least Nisan of the next year (538) in order to have had

a "year one" (Dn 11:1) according to the method of counting used at that time. Comparison with Daniel 10:1 implies that Darius's year one preceded the first (and third) years of Cyrus. Secular historians and biblical commentators who are of the opinion that the book of Daniel is wrong in historical matters have no problem with this dilemma, because they either dismiss Darius the Mede as a fictional nonentity or say that the author of Daniel confused him with Darius I Hystaspes (522–486 BC). One response of conservative writers has been to postulate that Darius the Mede was the same as Cyrus the Persian; this would place the third year of Cyrus/Darius at the same time given by secular historians. However, the second article in this series will show the reasonableness of the standard interpretation that "Darius" was the throne name of Cyaxares II, king of Media and uncle of Cyrus—an interpretation held by commentators as early as Josephus and Jerome, and by later eminent commentators including John Calvin, Archbishop Ussher, Adam Clarke, Lange, Keil and Delitzsch, and others.

In the upcoming Summer edition of *Bible and Spade*, evidence will be presented showing that Darius/Cyaxares died in the fall of 538 BC, and that 538 then became Cyrus's accession or "zero" year (*resh sharruti*), such that Cyrus's year one began in Nisan of 537 and his third year began in Nisan of 535.



Endnotes for *How Belshazzar Was Deleted from History and Who Did It*

Spring 2022 Bible and Spade

Notes

¹ Edgar J. Banks, “A Nebuchadnezzar Cylinder,” *Open Court* 29, no. 12 (December 1915); Raymond Philip Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar: A Study of the Closing Events of the Neo-Babylonian Empire*, Yale Oriental Series, Researches 15 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1929), 194 n. 642.

² Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 261–62.

³ J. Paul Tanner, *Daniel*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary, ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 337 n. 475.

⁴ Otto Zöckler, *The Book of the Prophet Daniel, Theologically and Homiletically Expounded*, trans. James Strong, in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, vol. 7, *Ezekiel, Daniel and the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 34.

⁵ Verse Account of Nabonidus, from James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, third edition with supplement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 313b (final brackets original). Hereafter *ANET*.

⁶ Steinmann, *Daniel*, 260.

⁷ Carol A. Newsom with Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 163.

⁸ Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556–539 B.C.*, Yale Near Eastern Researches 10 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 80.

⁹ Zöckler, *Book of the Prophet Daniel*, 33 (Note 3). I myself mistakenly held this view that the first Labynetetus was Nebuchadnezzar II; see Rodger C. Young, “Xenophon’s Cyaxares: Uncle of Cyrus, Friend of Daniel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 64, no. 2 (2021): 276, <http://www.rcyoung.org/articles/Cyaxares.html>, where I wrote, “Neither does Herodotus have any mention of Belshazzar.” Although Herodotus does not mention the name *Belshazzar*, the proper understanding of *Histories* 1.188, as expounded by Dougherty (see below), shows that Belshazzar is referred to there under the name *Labynetetus* (II).

¹⁰ Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar*, 34–37.

¹¹ Jamie Stokes, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East* (New York: Facts On File, 2009), 380; D. P. Erdbrink, review of *Türken, Kurden und Iraner seit dem Altertum*, by Egon von Eickstedt, *Central Asiatic Journal* 12, no. 1 (1968): 64–65; A. M. Prokhorov, “Guti,” in *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, 31 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 7:498.

¹² John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ed. Frank Moore Cross (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 32, 33.

¹³ Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar*, 188.

¹⁴ *ANET*, 306b.

¹⁵ For a translation of the Dream Text, see Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*, 107–108, 210–11, 214, or https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cylinders_of_Nabonidus.

¹⁶ *ANET*, 314a (all brackets original).

¹⁷ Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*, 108.

¹⁸ *ANET*, 315b, 316a.

¹⁹ Hanspeter Schaudig and Mordechai Cogan think the reference is to Nabonidus, while R. J. van der Spek and Irving Finkel interpret it as a reference to Belshazzar. Hanspeter Schaudig, “The Text of the Cyrus Cylinder,” in *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*, ed. M. Rahim Shayegan, Ilex Foundation Series 21 (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2018), 21; Mordechai Cogan, “Achaemenid Inscriptions: Cyrus; Cyrus Cylinder (2.124)” in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., vol. 2, *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 315; R. J. van der Spek, “Cyrus the Great, Exiles, and Foreign Gods: A Comparison of Assyrian and Persian Policies on Subject Nations,” in *Extraction and Control: Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper*, ed. Michael Kozuh et al., Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 68 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the

University of Chicago, 2014), 252; Irving Finkel, “The Cyrus Cylinder: The Babylonian Perspective,” in *The Cyrus Cylinder: The King of Persia’s Proclamation from Ancient Babylon*, ed. Irving Finkel (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 4.

²⁰ Steven D. Anderson, *Darius the Mede: A Reappraisal* (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2014). The dissertation was expanded by Anderson into a self-published book that is available at Amazon.com and also at Anderson’s Academia.edu page, <https://independent.academia.edu/StevenAnderson10>.

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