

LESSON 4

The Claim of Historical Errors in Daniel Regarding Belshazzar

We have already talked quite a bit about Nebuchadnezzar, the Chaldean king of Babylon. Who came after him as king? (See Box F on the Lesson 3 Handout available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com.)

The next to rule was Nebuchadnezzar's son, Amel-Marduk, which means "man of Marduk." (Marduk was the patron deity of the city of Babylon.)

Amel-Marduk was murdered by the next to take the office, Neriglissar, who was married to a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. Neriglissar is mentioned in Jeremiah 39:13.

Next came Neriglissar's young son, Labashi-Marduk, who was murdered by the next king after only nine months.

That next king was Nabonidus, who may have been of Assyrian ancestry. Nabonidus was reigning as king when the Persians conquered Babylon under Cyrus.

Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus. But Daniel 5:1 says that Belshazzar was king of Babylon when Cyrus conquered the city. And Daniel 5:2 says that not only was Belshazzar the final Chaldean king, but Nebuchadnezzar was his father. How do we explain this?

The modern liberal critic argues that these statements are historical errors in the book of Daniel and point to a late date for its authorship. Are they right? No. Let's see why.

QUESTION 1: Why is Nebuchadnezzar called the father of Belshazzar four times in Daniel 5 and Belshazzar called the son of Nebuchadnezzar once in that chapter?

One possible explanation comes from the fact that the Hebrew use of “father” and “son” can simply mean “ancestor” and “descendant.” It is possible that a genetic relationship existed between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. If Nabonidus (Belshazzar’s father) had married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar in order to legitimize his rule, then his son by her (Belshazzar) would be the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. This view is strengthened by the fact that Nabonidus named one of his other sons Nebuchadnezzar. Also, as we have already said, an earlier king (Neriglissar) is known to have married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. If this conjecture is ever proved by archaeology it would point yet again to something that would have been impossible for a Jew living in Palestine in 165 BC to have known.

A second possible explanation is that the term “son” often referred to a successor in the same office, whether or not there was a blood relationship. This was most likely the usage found in Jeremiah 27.

Jeremiah 27:7 — And all nations shall serve him [Nebuchadnezzar], and his son, and his son’s son, until the very time of his land come: and then many nations and great kings shall serve themselves of him.

QUESTION 2: Why does Daniel say that Belshazzar was king of Babylon?

Archaeology has shown that Nabonidus took up residence at Tema in north Arabia and left his son Belshazzar in charge of the northern frontier of the Babylonian empire. Thus, Belshazzar did become the de facto king of Babylon after his father left him in charge. See Box E on the Lesson 3 Handout, which shows Nabonidus worshipping the moon god, Sin. The king’s devotion to the moon god upset the local followers of the Babylonian god, Marduk. Some historians believe this is why Nabonidus moved the capital to Tema, leaving his son Belshazzar to govern the city of Babylon. The author of Daniel knew the historical fact that Belshazzar was in

charge of the city when it fell. How would the author of Daniel have known this had he been writing centuries later as the liberal critics argue?

One commentator has correctly written:

Belshazzar then, technically occupied a position subordinate to that of Nabonidus. Nevertheless, since he was the man in regal status with whom the Jews had to do, Daniel calls him king. This cannot justly be charged as an inaccuracy.

Further, tablets dating from 543 BC have been found showing that Belshazzar and his father were on equal footing. Daniel apparently knew what he was talking about!

The radical critics argue that Belshazzar's authority to appoint anyone he pleased as third ruler in the kingdom in Daniel 5:16 indicates that he was an absolute ruler, not a sub-king. (Just think for a moment about how silly that argument is!) This is very different from the offer that Pharaoh made to Joseph in Genesis 41:40 — he offered the second position. Why did Belshazzar promise only the third position and not the second position? Because he was already the second, and his father was the first! The third was the only open spot! How would a Jew writing 400 years later have known this?

Belshazzar was long thought to have never existed, until his name was found by archaeologists. Daniel tells us all about him!

Incredibly, one modern scholar has written:

We shall presumably never know how our author learned that the new Babylon was the creation of Nebuchadnezzar, as the excavations have proved, and that Belshazzar was functioning as king when Cyrus took Babylon in 538.

If that liberal scholar believed in God, he would know!

As an aside, the Dead Sea Scrolls included a fragmentary document containing the “Prayer of Nabonidus.” That document tells how Nabonidus was struck by a “dread disease of the most high God” and for seven years was “set apart from men.” This event is very similar to what happened to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:23-33.

The Claim That Darius the Mede Never Existed

In Daniel 5:30-31 we read:

In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.

One critic has written that “the references to Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel have long been recognized as providing the most serious historical problem in the book.”

The late-date proponents claim that:

- The author of Daniel incorrectly believed that a Median kingdom, under Darius, conquered Babylon and subsequently gave way to the Persian empire under Cyrus. (It is known that Babylon fell directly to Cyrus and the Persians.)
- Darius the Mede never actually existed but was a confused reflection of a later Persian ruler, Darius I (Hystaspes).
- The four kingdoms in Daniel 2 and Daniel 7 are thus Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece (meaning that, despite what Jesus said in Matthew 24, the book of Daniel nothing to say about Rome).

True, that view makes Jesus a liar, but it does keep the supernatural out of the Bible, which is all the liberal scholar really cares about.

The book of Daniel never claims that Darius was the king of Media but only that he was of Median descent. To say that Napoleon was a Corsican does not mean that Napoleon was the king of Corsica.

The author of Daniel says that Darius and Cyrus had different ancestries (Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede), not that they ruled separate kingdoms.

Daniel 6:12 says: “The king [Darius] answered and said, The thing is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not.” If Darius ruled an independent kingdom of Media then why was he subject to the law of the Persians?

Daniel’s interpretation of the handwriting on the wall in 5:28 indicates that the Persians would be the main element of the empire that succeeded the Babylonians. (“PERES: Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”) Daniel says that Babylon would be conquered not by the Medes alone but by the Medes and the Persians, with the Persians playing the greater role.

The vision in Chapter 8 depicts a combined Medo-Persian empire as a single ram with two horns. The horn depicting Persia comes up last, but BEFORE the ram sets out to conquer, which is precisely the order in which history tells us the events occurred.

Just because the name “Darius the Mede” has not been found in any ancient inscriptions does not mean that he did not exist. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The critics made similar claims about Belshazzar and Sargon and archaeology has now proved them wrong.

Who then was Darius? We don’t know for sure, but we will look at three suggestions that have been made by various commentators.

Some suggest that Darius the Mede was actually Darius I, a later ruler of Persia.

This view must be rejected for the following reasons.

It would mean that the author of Daniel was mistaken about the chronology of Persian rulers. Daniel calls Darius a Mede, and Darius I was a Persian.

Daniel says that Darius the Mede was 62 when he began to rule. Darius I was in his 20's when he began to rule.

Daniel 9:1 says that Darius the Mede “was MADE king” implying that he was appointed king over Babylon by some higher authority (Cyrus). Darius I, however, succeeded to the throne after the death of Cambyses.

Such confusion as to the true nationality and time sequence of Darius the Great would have been unthinkable in the second-century BC Hellenistic world. Why? Because in the Near East every schoolboy was required to read Xenophon, if not Herodotus, and other Greek historians from the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Even in Hellenistic Palestine, these authors were widely read and admired. It is from Xenophon and Herodotus that we gain our information concerning Cyrus and Darius. Any Greek-writing author who attempted to put Darius before Cyrus would have been laughed off the stage by the general public; and no credence would have been given to anything he wrote.

Darius the Mede was another name for Cyrus the Persian.

Daniel 6:28 says that “Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.” This statement seems odd if the two men were the same person (but we will have more to say about this view in a later lesson).

The third option is likely the best option: Darius the Mede was an early governor of Babylon under Cyrus.

The references to Darius in Daniel do not say that he ruled the Persian empire — only that he took control of the conquered Chaldean empire. It was a well-known practice of Cyrus to appoint Medes to high positions in order to foster goodwill and loyalty. Critics claim that Darius the Mede had too much authority to have been just a governor. Read Daniel 6:25–26.

Then king Darius wrote unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you. I make a decree, That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.

Yet the phrase “every dominion of my kingdom” could simply mean all of the land over which he had been given authority. Remember that his land consisted of people from many different countries — such as Daniel and his friends.

Which governor was he? One commentator has written:

Gubaru the Governor of Babylon fits the Biblical description of Darius the Mede so remarkably that the writer believes he will be recognized in due time as the monarch who played such an important role in the life of Daniel and the fall of Babylon. ... We believe that this identification is the only one which satisfactorily harmonizes the various lines of evidence which we find in the book of Daniel and in the contemporary cuneiform records.

Why is he called Darius? The name seems to be related to the Persian word “dara,” which is a term for “king.” Like Augustus among the Romans, Darius may have been a special honorific title, which could also be used as a proper name.

Daniel’s failure to mention any date later than Darius’ “first year” (9:1) may mean that his reign was of very brief duration. If so, an empire that lasted for only a single year introduces an element of utter implausibility into the Maccabean date hypothesis. A one-year empire could hardly have been set up as number two in a series that included the Chaldean Empire, which lasted for 73 years, the Persian Empire, which lasted for 208 years, and the Greek Empire, which would have been around for 167 years by 165 BC.

The Claim That Events in Daniel Are Improbable or Absurd

In Daniel 4:33 we read the account of Nebuchadnezzar's illness in which he roamed the fields thinking himself to be an ox.

The same hour was the thing fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar: and he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws.

Critics claim that the sickness of Nebuchadnezzar is too incredible to be true. Too incredible to be true? These critics need to pull their heads out of their books and watch a little daytime TV. If the talk shows on TV today do nothing else, they prove that nothing is too strange to be true. A man who thinks he is a cow? It wouldn't even make the first cut on the Dr. Phil show.

Not only is it NOT that incredible, but it has a name: *boanthropy*. R. K. Harrison speaks of an encounter he had with such a person in a British mental hospital. He ate only vegetation and drank only water. His health was excellent and the only physical abnormality noticed was the length and coarseness of his hair and the thickened condition of his nails.

No Babylonian record has been found that mentions any activity by Nebuchadnezzar during the period 582 to 575. Perhaps because during those years the king was outstanding in his field, or should I say out grazing in his field!

The Claim That Daniel Violates the Supposed Nature of Biblical Prophecy

This is a classic straw man argument. The critics set up a straw man by defining prophecy and then seek to discredit Daniel because it does not fit their own definition.

One critic has written that “prophecy in the Bible is characterized by an absence of specific predictions. It is forthtelling and not foretelling.” The prophecy in Daniel is primarily of the latter variety.

What about Jesus? He made specific prophecies regarding his death, the manner of his death, the perpetrators of his death, his betrayal, the death of Peter, the denial by Peter, his resurrection, and the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation.

John 14:29 — *And now I [Jesus] have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe.*

What do liberals do with the host of predictions found in both the Old and New Testaments? They usually call in a late unnamed editor to deal with the problem. That is, they say that someone came along after the book was written and after certain events had occurred and changed the book to make it look like those events had been predicted long ago. (Those magical and convenient late editors solve a variety of problems for the liberals.)

The Claim That the Type of Aramaic Used in Daniel Indicates a Late Date

Daniel 2:4b through 7:28 is in the Aramaic language. (The remainder is in Hebrew.) It was once claimed by some that the form of Aramaic used in Daniel was the type used in the third century BC and not the type used in the sixth century BC. But this argument fell apart in 1929 when a farmer discovered what were later called the Ras Shamra tablets inside an underground passage. The Aramaic in these tablets is similar to that in Daniel and they date back to 1400 BC.

It is also claimed that the Aramaic in Daniel is a western dialect that was only used in Palestine. Even if this were true it would not prove that Daniel was written in Palestine. The book was undoubtedly copied many times and the language may have been updated to conform to the common dialect. (For example, the original KJV Bible used an older form of English than we see in the KJV Bible today.)

However, many scholars dispute the claim that the Aramaic in Daniel is western. One has asserted that it predates the eastern and western distinction. Another has written that the Aramaic in Daniel is a form that originated in the courts and governments of the seventh century BC.

E. J. Young has written that “it is becoming more and more clear that the languages cannot be employed as arguments against the antiquity of the book.”

But this all raises another question: Why were two different languages used? It is NOT unique to Daniel. In the book of Ezra, four chapters are also written in Aramaic.

Some critics have claimed that there were two authors, but even most of the liberals reject that theory since the message of the book is clearly woven throughout the entire work. But part of Daniel is written in the third person. Doesn't this imply another author? No. It is common to switch between first and third person in the Bible. Even God does it in Exodus 20. (See verse 2 (first person) and verse 7 (third person).)

One commentator has written:

Even critical scholars admit that only one author produced Daniel. The identity of the author appears from the unity of the plan, the relation of various parts to each other, the gradation of the oracles from the uncertain to the certain, the remarkable uniformity of ideas, images, forms, symbols, and that even in two languages there is a remarkable similarity of style.

Why then are two languages used? A much better explanation than two authors is that there were two audiences — which we know was true.

One commentator has written:

The Aramaic chapters deal with matters pertaining to the entire citizenry of the Babylonian and the Persian empires, whereas the other

six chapters relate to peculiarly Jewish concerns and God's special plans for the future of his covenant people.

The Claim That the Type of Hebrew Used in Daniel Points to a Late Date

The Hebrew language underwent a big change around the time of Nehemiah. The critics claim that Daniel's Hebrew resembles the later type and thus points to a late date for the book.

But, as we already mentioned, the book was undoubtedly copied many times and the language may have been updated to conform to the common dialect.

And, once again, this argument can be turned around. It is very telling that the Hebrew portion of Daniel contains no Greek words. That seems very odd if Daniel had been written after nearly 200 years of Greek rule in Palestine.

The political terms in Daniel are largely Persian, which one would expect if the book had been written during the reign of Cyrus.

Also, the Hebrew used in the Dead Sea Scroll sectarian documents does NOT resemble the Hebrew used in Daniel, which seems odd if they were written at about the same time.

One of the most radical critics has written that "from the Hebrew of the Book of Daniel no important inference as to its date can be safely drawn" (which means, if he were honest, he would agree that it supported an early date!). Any time a liberal critic concludes that no inference can be drawn based on certain evidence — it nearly always means that the evidence overwhelmingly supports the early date view!

The Claim That the Use of Persian Words in Daniel Indicates a Late Date

Several words of Persian origin are present in the Hebrew and especially in the Aramaic parts of Daniel. The radical critics assert that the Persian language did not penetrate the Aramaic of Babylon until long after Cyrus' conquest. The Persian term "satrap" is used throughout Daniel as if it were a Babylonian title. The critics say that such usage points to a much later date.

But it is very possible that the term had already become a Babylonian title due to the Persian influence that already existed. Also, if Daniel wrote the book after the fall of Babylon then he might have substituted Persian terms in place of the older Babylonian terms.

Again, this argument can be turned against the late-date crowd. The first Greek translations of Daniel appeared around 100 BC (Septuagint and Theodotian). Many of the Persian words in these translations were MISTRANSLATED, which seems odd if the book had been written only 65 years earlier. Clearly, the words had been forgotten or had changed meaning since the time when Daniel was written, which points to an early date for the book.

The Claim That the Use of Greek Words in Daniel Indicates a Late Date

Daniel 3:5 (in the Aramaic section) contains three words of Greek origin, all of which are musical terms. It is claimed that such words could only have been used after Greek influence had spread throughout Asia after the conquest by Alexander the Great — again indicating a late date.

But how much cultural spread does it require to learn three new words? If the book had been written 400 years later, then wouldn't we expect to find many Greek words instead of only three?

There are 20 Persian words and three Greek words in Daniel. Does this make sense if Daniel had been written during the Greek empire and long after the Persian empire? (By 170 BC, a Greek speaking government had controlled Palestine for 160 years.)

One author has said, “It is the fewness of the Greek words, coupled with the fact that they are only the names of musical instruments, that must prove fatal to the critics’ theory that the book was written in 165 BC.”

Experts now agree that Greek culture had penetrated the Near East long before the Neo-Babylonian period. The terms may have been introduced by Greek traders before the rise of the Persian empire. The Elephantine papyri is a fifth century Aramaic document that contains a number of Greek words.

It is significant that the terms are all musical terms. Such terms are frequently borrowed when the instruments they describe become known.

Let’s apply the modern liberal argument to another book. Look at song numbers 627 and 628 in our song book. The word “*legato*” appears at the beginning of number 627. It is Italian for “tied together,” meaning that the notes should be sung smoothly or connected. The word “*fine*” (pronounced “fen-nay”) appears right before the chorus of number 628. (It does not mean that you are doing *fine*!) It means “end” in Italian. When we see those terms in our song book, do we conclude the author of the song must have been steeped in Italian culture? Silly, right? Why isn’t it just as silly to conclude that the author of Daniel was steeped in Greek culture?

In summary, the book of Daniel was written by Daniel in Babylon during the late sixth century BC. That means that the prophecies it contains are genuine and accurate, and they are absolute proof of the Bible’s inspiration.