

THE NEO-BABYLONIAN HISTORICAL SETTING FOR DANIEL 7

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In a series of earlier studies on the historical chapters of Daniel, I have suggested that a number of details in those narratives can be correlated with events of the sixth century B.C. to a greater degree than has previously been appreciated.¹ In some instances, it is also possible to make a rather direct correlation between an historical narrative in the book and a related prophetic passage. An example of this is supplied in the final three chapters of the book.² By locating the historical narrative of Dan 10 in the early Persian period, it is also possible to propose the same date for the immediately connected and directly related prophecy of Dan 11-12.³

Another example of the same kind of relationship can be proposed for Dan 9. An historical setting for the prophecy of 9:24-27 can be inferred indirectly from my previous study on Darius the Mede in Dan 6,⁴ since the narrative in which this prophecy of 9:24-27 occurs is dated, in 9:1, to Darius' reign. Thus, this prophecy fits with the indicated early-Persian-period setting, a setting also presupposed by the lengthy prayer preceding the prophecy—namely, Daniel's appeal for the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prediction concerning the return and restoration of the Judahite exiles (9:4-19). The contents of Daniel's prophecy correlate well in this respect, too, as being a forward look to the future of the community, once it had been restored. Thus, the expressed date in the heading of Dan 9:1,

¹W. H. Shea, "Daniel 3: Extra-Biblical Texts and the Convocation on the Plain of Dura," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 29-52; idem, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel: An Update," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 133-149; idem, "Darius the Mede: An Update," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 229-247; idem, "A Further Note on Daniel 6: Daniel as 'Governor,'" *AUSS* 21 (1983): 169-171; idem, "Wrestling with the Prince of Persia: A Study on Daniel 10," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 225-250.

²Shea, "Wrestling with the Prince," pp. 225-250.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

⁴Shea, "Darius the Mede," pp. 229-247.

the implied date for Daniel's prayer (cf. vss. 2-3), and the nature of the contents of the prophecy itself in vss. 24-27 all fit together in a harmonious whole that is readily compatible with an early-Persian-period origin.

My previous historical studies on Daniel have, then, provided reasonable settings in the life of the sixth century B.C. for two of the prophecies of the book, those of Dan 9 and Dan 10-12. More can be said, however, about the historical setting for the prophecy of Dan 7, and it is the purpose of this study to explore that relationship.

1. *History and the Dateline of Daniel 7*

The prophecy of Dan 7 is dated to the first year of Belshazzar (vs. 1). As far as the date of authorship of this prophetic narrative is concerned, this date would have been a very unusual one to have been employed by a Palestinian author writing in the second century B.C., the date commonly applied to this narrative. On the other hand, it makes very good sense if considered as coming from an author writing in Babylon during the sixth century B.C. From the recovery of the composition known as "The Prayer of Nabonidus" among the fragments of the scrolls at Qumran,⁵ it is clear that at least some Jews who lived in Judea in the second and first centuries B.C. were aware of the historical existence of Nabonidus as the last king of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty. Inasmuch as this composition also reveals a knowledge of the fact that Nabonidus spent a considerable number of years in Tema of Arabia, it is reasonable to expect that his position as the last king of the dynasty probably was known, as well. Belshazzar, on the other hand, is *not known* from any historical sources that survived in continued use, aside from the book of Daniel itself and those references that are directly dependent upon Daniel.⁶ A date in the time of Belshazzar in the sixth century B.C. is, therefore, a much better setting for the origin of the dateline of Dan 7:1—and, thus, for the prophecy connected with it.

⁵J. T. Milik, "'Priere de Nabonide' et autres écrits d'un cycle de Daniel," *RB* 63 (1956): 407-415.

⁶H. H. Rowley, *Darius the Mede and the Four World Empires* (Cardiff, 1935), p. 10.

2. *History and the Contents of the Prophecy of Daniel 7*

This bare historical fact about the dateline of Dan 7:1 becomes much more important when it is employed to assess the significance of the first year of Belshazzar as the setting for the giving of the prophecy in chap. 7. The question here may be put as follows: What was so significant about the first year of Belshazzar that made it important enough to serve as the occasion for the giving of this prophecy, and why was this prophecy given at this precise time rather than at some other time? An answer to this twofold question can be proposed from a comparison between the major event that happened in Babylon during the year of the dateline and the contents of the prophecy.

The major event that occurred in Babylon during the first year of Belshazzar was that very event to which the dateline itself points—namely, the installation of Belshazzar as regent of Babylon when his father, King Nabonidus, left for an extended stay in Tema of Arabia. Even though I have suggested a minor alteration in the way this action is viewed,⁷ it still should be described as the establishment of a coregency. This is the way in which it has been treated by various commentaries and histories of that period.

The political importance of this event is emphasized by the fact that for the series of years thereafter, the Nabonidus Chronicle records mainly that the king stayed in Tema, that Belshazzar was in Babylon, and that the New Year's festival—for which the personal presence of Nabonidus was necessary—was not celebrated.⁸ Clearly, then, as far as events in Babylon were concerned, the most important event in the first year of Belshazzar was the establishment of the coregency between Belshazzar the son and Nabonidus his father.

With this major event identified by the dateline of Dan 7:1 as the immediate background for the occasion of the giving of the prophecy of Dan 7, the contents of that prophecy can be examined for any potentially significant relationship to that background. Here, one's attention is immediately called to the climax of the vision, its last major scene that is described in vss. 9-14. This scene is set in heaven. There, the Ancient of Days presides over a heavenly

⁷Shea, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel," pp. 133-149.

⁸*ANET*, p. 306.

tribunal. The final act in that heavenly court scene was revealed to the prophet when he saw,

And behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass
away,
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan 7:13-14).

In the study of this passage, I concur with G. F. Hasel's conclusion that the "Son of Man" should be distinguished from the "Saints of the Most High" that are mentioned in Dan 7:17, 22, 25, and 27.⁹ This "Son of Man" is a heavenly figure, and those "Saints" are located on earth. I also concur with Arthur Ferch's elucidation of this subject.¹⁰

We have here, then, a single individual in heaven who partakes of both divine and human (messianic) characteristics, and he comes to the Ancient of Days—God who sits upon the central throne in the scene—and receives from him rulership over the final, eternal, all-encompassing kingdom of God on earth. This passage, thus, describes the establishment of a coregency: that of the Son of Man with the Ancient of Days.

Although this is the description of the establishment of a coregency between quite different types of individuals than those participating in such an arrangement in Babylon in 550 B.C., there still is present here the description of the establishment of a similar type of arrangement between them: *a coregency*.

The conclusion to be drawn from this comparison is that during the first year of Belshazzar, the year in which he was installed as coregent with his father Nabonidus, the prophet received—according to the dateline connected with it—a vision of the future

⁹G. F. Hasel, "The Identity of 'The Saints of the Most High' in Daniel 7," *Biblica* 56 (1975): 176-185.

¹⁰A. J. Ferch, *The Apocalyptic "Son of Man" in Daniel 7* (Th.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1979).

establishment in heaven of a coregency between two beings there. A comparison between these two events of similar nature can be outlined as follows:

	<i>Historical Coregency</i>	<i>Prophetic Coregency</i>
<i>Date:</i>	1st year of Belshazzar (550 BC.)	The End of Time
<i>Location:</i>	City of Babylon	The Temple in Heaven
<i>Senior Coregent:</i>	Nabonidus	The Ancient of Days
<i>Junior Coregent:</i>	Belshazzar	The Son of Man

As a minor chronological aside, it should be pointed out that, by nature of the relationship involved, there was in ancient practice no accession period for the junior coregent at the time he was appointed. Since the establishment of a coregency did not require the death of the old king, the junior king began dating his regnal years from the time of his installation in office. Thus, the 1st year of Belshazzar was the same year as that in which he was appointed as regent; it was not the year after that appointment. This type of arrangement is most clear from the information about the Egyptian coregencies,¹¹ it is chronologically compatible with the coregencies in the kingdom of Judah,¹² and thus it is also probable for this coregency in Babylon.

3. Conclusion

The nature of the relationship between these two coregencies expressed in the Danielic passage should be carefully noted. By no means is it implied here that Dan 7:9-14 constitutes a description or prophecy of the establishment of the coregency between Nabonidus and Belshazzar. The contents of the prophecy make it clear that this is not the case. This heavenly coregency is at least four kingdoms later than the one between Belshazzar and Nabonidus.

¹¹On the Egyptian coregencies, see W. J. Murnane, *Ancient Egyptian Coregencies*, SAOC, vol. 40 (Chicago, 1977).

¹²For the coregencies among the kings of Judah see E. R. Thiele, *Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1965).

The relationship between the two is rather one of analogy or parallelism. At the time when one of these coregencies was established in Babylon, the prophet was given a vision about the establishment of a coregency of a similar type, but of quite different nature, that would be established in the future.

While these two coregencies were, thus, by no means one and the same, it should be pointed out that the contemporary earthly coregency served to illustrate the future heavenly one. In order for the prophet better to understand what he was given in vision, this was shown to him in the very same year that a similar relationship was established on an earthly scale directly before his eyes—in his time and place. In other words, a human analogy has been employed here as the setting for, and illustration of, the divine event yet to come.

Finally, it should be noted how particularly appropriate this specific year was. Since no other coregencies are known to have occurred during the seven decades of the existence of the Neo-Babylonian dynastic empire, this year was the most appropriate one in that whole era for the Babylonian captive Daniel to have been shown a vision which included this element. The date in the dateline of Dan 7:1 is, therefore, altogether appropriate for the occasion upon which to have given the prophet a vision with the contents outlined in chap. 7.