

THE BELSHAZZAR OF DANIEL AND THE BELSHAZZAR OF HISTORY¹

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In a recent issue of this journal William H. Shea has discussed the question of Belshazzar in the light of current scholarship, concluding among other things that the writer of Dan 5 was an eyewitness of the events narrated in that chapter.² While some of the article is devoted to giving evidence for this conclusion, much of it is predicated on the assumption that Dan 5 is historically accurate. In other words, a good deal of Shea's discussion assumes what he is attempting to prove!

To begin with a prime example, Shea discusses the important question of whether Belshazzar was ever made king over Babylon, and in doing so he faces squarely the difficulties involved. In the end, Shea tacitly recognizes that we have no external evidence that Belshazzar was ever formally king, for he speaks of "two possible explanations."³ He obviously favors one of these, giving a lengthy and ingenious explanation—virtually a *tour de force*—of how Belshazzar *could* have been made king at the last minute. But it is all pure conjecture and assumes the accuracy of Daniel's ascription of kingship to Belshazzar. Shea does not mention another possible explanation, one favored by the majority of OT scholars: that even though there is a historical figure behind Dan 5, much of the chapter is unhistorical theologizing.

Shea mentions the important study of R. P. Dougherty more than half a century ago.⁴ He does not refer to the lengthy review of

¹My sincere thanks to Amélie Kuhrt, who read a draft of this article and made a number of helpful comments, as well as bringing some bibliographical items to my attention which I otherwise would not have been aware of.

²W. H. Shea, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel: An Update," *AUSS* 20 (1982):133-149.

³*Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴R. P. Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar*, Yale Oriental Series, vol. 15 (New Haven, CT, 1929).

that work by H. H. Rowley, however, and goes on to repeat a number of assertions about Dan 5 which Rowley—and others—have argued against in some detail.⁵ This does not mean that Rowley was necessarily correct in all his objections, but it would seem that Shea should address himself to some of these difficulties rather than simply repeating naive claims which many think were refuted long ago. The rest of my article covers some of the major points which seem to me to be relevant to the question.

1. *When Did Belshazzar Die?*

Dan 5:30 makes the clear statement that Belshazzar was killed on the very same night that he had seen the “handwriting on the wall.” If there is any event crucial to the historicity of the account, surely this would be it. Yet our current knowledge of the fall of Babylon allows us to say with a good deal of confidence that *Belshazzar did not die at that time*. This is clear from the Nabonidus Chronicle, which is a trustworthy and valuable source for Babylonian political history where it is extant:

Within the boundaries of their interest, the writers are quite objective and impartial. . . . Further, the authors have included all Babylonian kings known to have ruled in this period and there is no evidence that they have omitted any important events which have a bearing on Babylonia during their reigns. Every significant event known in the period from sources other than the chronicles . . . which affects Babylonia is referred to in the chronicle.⁶

⁵H. H. Rowley, “The Historicity of the Fifth Chapter of Daniel,” *JTS* 32 (1931):12-31; “The Belshazzar of Daniel and of History,” *Expositor*, 9th series, 2 (1924):182-195, 255-272. Cf. also the major commentaries, in particular R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Oxford, 1929), and J. A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1927); see also L. F. Hartman and A. A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, AB 23 (Garden City, NY, 1978). The comment by the Assyriologist W. von Soden about Dougherty’s book should be noted (“Eine babylonische Volksüberlieferung von Nabonid in den Danielerzählungen,” *ZAW* 53 [1935]:88, n. 1): “I cannot consider his conclusions from cuneiform and later traditions to be correct for the most part [Seine Folgerungen aus Keilschrifturkunden und späteren Überlieferungen kann ich allerdings zum grossen Teil nicht für richtig halten].”

⁶A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Locust Valley, NY, 1975), p. 99. I have used Grayson’s edition of the Nabonidus Chronicle for the research for this article.

While the Nabonidus Chronicle is unfortunately fragmentary for a number of years, it is basically complete for the year in which Babylon fell. Column iii, lines 14-18, describes the taking of the city of Babylon by Gubaru "without a battle," the flight and subsequent capture of Nabonidus, and the entry of Cyrus into Babylon about three weeks after Gubaru had entered. Although these lines are almost perfectly preserved, there is no mention of the death of Belshazzar or of anyone else. Unless there has been a grave and otherwise unattested scribal lapse at this point, we can only conclude that Belshazzar was not killed at the time of the taking of Babylon. But there is no reason to allow for even this unparalleled error for the simple reason that the city fell "without a battle"; no one died, much less the king's son, because there was no fighting in this part of the conquest. After the Babylonian defeat at Opis, the will to defend themselves seems to have collapsed, and the Persians evidently just walked into the capital city. This is, of course, a direct contradiction of the statement in Dan 5:30.⁷ In fact, we have no knowledge that Belshazzar was even still alive in Nabonidus' last year. Our known documented evidence for Belshazzar ceases after Nabonidus' 14th year, several years before the fall of Babylon.⁸ While we cannot know for certain, we must allow for the possibility that Belshazzar was already dead by the time of Nabonidus' last year.

The information of the Nabonidus Chronicle is borne out by some other considerations. Berossus, whose account of the fall of Babylon is extant, says nothing about the death of the king's son.⁹ On the other hand, he does state that Nabonidus, after first fleeing, decided to surrender to Cyrus, who treated him well and let him settle in Carmania.¹⁰ The gracious treatment of conquered rulers

⁷For a long time it was thought that the individual whose death is reported in Nabonidus Chronicle iii.23 might be the king's son (see, e.g., Rowley, "The Belshazzar of Daniel," p. 259). No recent editions read anything but "the wife" of the king. In any event, the death of the individual in question occurred several weeks after the city was taken.

⁸See Dougherty, p. 85, for the last reference to Belshazzar in the extant tablets.

⁹The standard collection of fragments is F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (Leiden, 1957), no. 680. A convenient translation of the major passages with commentary is S. M. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* (Malibu, CA, 1978).

¹⁰Jacoby, no. 680, F 9 = Josephus, *C. Apion* 1.146-153.

was a general characteristic of Persian rulers, Nabonidus being no exception.¹¹ But if Nabonidus was treated well, why should Belshazzar have been killed? And if he had been killed, a particularly notable event for the reasons already indicated, why would both Berossus and the Chronicle be silent on the matter?¹² In sum, the current state of our information is overwhelmingly against the historicity of Dan 5:30 as it stands.

2. *Was Belshazzar Ever King?*

Shea has faced squarely the problem that Belshazzar is never referred to as "king" in any of our sources, contrary to some other

¹¹Herodotus claims that it was the Persian custom "to honor king's sons; even though kings revolt from them, yet they give back to their sons the sovereign power" (3.15), and he goes on to give several examples to demonstrate this. Herodotus' statement is backed up with examples of actual treatment of captured kings as reported by other writers. For example, as already noted, Nabonidus was not killed but treated kindly and allowed to settle in Carmania, according to Berossus (see n. 10, above), who seems to be supported by the recently published *Dynastic Prophecy* (ii.18-21; see A. K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* [Toronto, 1975], pp. 32-33). Croesus, king of Lydia, was also resettled at Ecbatana, according to Ctesias (Jacoby, no. 688, F 9 = Photius, *Bibl.* 72.5), or in Beroea, according to Justin 1.7.7. Nabonidus Chronicle ii.17 has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the king of Lydia was killed by Cyrus, but there are two problems with this interpretation: (1) it is not certain that the country there is Lydia (see Grayson, *Chronicles*, p. 282), and (2) the verb *idūk* can mean "fight, conquer" as well as "kill." For a thorough discussion of the question, see J. Cargill, "The Nabonidus Chronicle and the Fall of Lydia," *American Journal of Ancient History* 2 (1978):97-116. Another example of the Persian attitude to conquered kings is that of Astyages of Media who was resettled among the Barcanians, according to Ctesias (Jacoby, no. 688, F 9 = Photius, *Bibl.* 72.6), or the Hyrcanians, according to Justin 1.6.16.

¹²The only writing other than Dan 5 to suggest that a ruler was killed in the taking of the city is Xenophon (*Cyr.* 7.5.30). However, it must be kept in mind that the *Cyropaedia* is a very poor source for the doings of Cyrus: when not in downright error, the information it gives is often only an extremely garbled version of Persian history and can seldom be accepted when there is no independent confirmation (cf. H. R. Breitenbach, "Xenophon," *PW*, 9/A2: 1709-1718). In the case of the taking of Babylon, the *Cyropaedia* contradicts our contemporary sources (the Nabonidus Chronicle and the Cyrus Cylinder), nor is it even clear that the king said to be slain was meant to be Belshazzar: The king is described as being young, yet his father is stated to have been killed by Cyrus (*Cyr.* 4.6.2). If Xenophon is preserving a vague memory of an actual neo-Babylonian ruler, it could just as well be Nabonidus as Belshazzar.

writers on the subject.¹³ He attempts to obviate the difficulty by proposing a theory by which Belshazzar was formally given the kingship of Babylon on the night of the city's fall. Thus, the banquet of Dan 5 is interpreted as being actually a coronation ceremony for Belshazzar, while references to Belshazzar as "king" in the book of Daniel are done so proleptically. The theory is ingenious and, if accepted, would certainly remove some of the obstacles to reconciling the Belshazzar of Daniel with that known from the cuneiform sources.

But every theory, no matter how ingenious, must be evaluated in the light of possible alternatives to it. Shea does not consider whether his theory of a coronation ceremony in Dan 5 is the most natural explanation of the data there. First, there is no hint in the text that Belshazzar is being crowned. Second, why would his *concubines* be a part of the ceremony? Third, and most important, why would Belshazzar be made a king of Babylon when his father Nabonidus has already fled and the Persians were about to take the city? Such a theory also completely negates the climax of the chapter: Daniel's prophecy. In the light of the immediate events, a prophecy that Babylon was about to fall would hardly be surprising and certainly would not be evidence of Daniel's great wisdom. The only startling aspect of the episode would be the disembodied hand which did the writing. But what purpose would such a cryptic method of delivering the message serve when its actual content was so banal for the night in question? In his determination to find historicity in Dan 5, Shea has ignored the actual theological content of the account.

The aim of the chapter is surely to depict an arrogant king who flouts the majesty of the true God by drinking out of the temple vessels from Jerusalem and, moreover, by praising his idolatrous gods while doing so. This act of thumbing his nose at the true God is made more grave by the participation even of Belshazzar's concubines. Just as Belshazzar's "father" Nebuchadnezzar had committed an act of *hubris* and had suffered divine punishment, so the "son" repeats the sin and likewise reaps divine wrath. That the fate of Nebuchadnezzar, along with Daniel's amazing prediction of it, only a few decades before would have been

¹³See, e.g., G. F. Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 42-43.

forgotten so easily by Belshazzar would be absurd under normal circumstances. But the chapter is evidently not interested in such matters of logic or historicity but in proclaiming a theological message. Shea's efforts to find a coronation ceremony here ignore both the actual content of the chapter and its alleged setting at the time of the fall of Babylon.

3. *Daniel as "Third" in the Kingdom*

About the only positive evidence for the historicity of Dan 5 evinced by Shea is that Daniel was elevated to be "third" in the kingdom by Belshazzar. Rather surprisingly, Shea puts a great deal of emphasis on this as proof that the chapter was written by an eyewitness.¹⁴ This argument is not new and was long ago attacked as incorrect.¹⁵ Basically, the argument is that the Aramaic word in Dan 5:7, 16, 29 (*taltî, taltā'*) should not be translated literally as "third," but is actually the name of an official in the court. Recourse is usually made to the Akkadian word *šalšu*, which can mean "third" but is also the name of an official. If this explanation is correct, then Daniel's office says nothing about how many rulers there were in Babylon.

Shea's most cogent objection to this explanation seems to be a linguistic one.¹⁶ He asks why an Akkadian title *šalšu* would yield the Aramaic word *taltā'/î*. A loanword from Akkadian to Aramaic should yield *šalšā'/î*, which would seem to eliminate from consideration any explanation of the Aramaic term as a borrowing from Akkadian (though Shea does not consider the possibility that the term is a calque [loan translation] rather than a direct borrowing). But what is surprising is that Shea, after pointing out the difficulties with the traditional explanation, is then willing to assume that the

¹⁴Shea, p. 146: "The record of Dan 5 also recognizes by its references to 'third ruler' that Nabonidus was still alive, even though not present in Babylon."

¹⁵See some of the major commentaries cited in n. 6, above. Shea specifically interacts with Montgomery, p. 256. However, it should be noted that the same argument is used by von Soden, p. 88, n.1, who cites Ernest Klauber, *Assyrisches Beamtentum nach Briefen aus der Sargonidenzeit* (Leipzig, 1910), pp. 111-115.

¹⁶Shea's other objections depend on having an exact knowledge of what being a *šalšu*-officer would mean, rather than allowing for semantic development in a borrowed word, as one should.

meaning "third ruler in the kingdom" can be taken for granted without further argument. This ignores several problems: for example, how could Belshazzar make Daniel "third ruler" after himself and Nabonidus, without Nabonidus' own permission? It also ignores the most natural interpretation of the promise which is already given in Dan 6:3 (Eng 6:2): Daniel is one of three "presidents" (*sārkin*) who rule under the king. Thus, the promise of Belshazzar is fulfilled under his conqueror, Darius the Mede. There is no compelling reason to assume that Dan 5:7, 16, 29 indicates a knowledge of the existence of Nabonidus, and the context of the chapter is certainly against it.

4. *Was Nitocris the Queen at the Banquet?*

One final point is of no major consequence but is perhaps illustrative of how Shea's determined attempts to find historicity in Dan 5 has led him to overlook major considerations. He very tentatively identifies the "queen" at the banquet with Herodotus' last great Babylonian queen Nitocris (1.185-188). Shea is commendably cautious, but he has also made no attempt to examine the question very carefully. Herodotus' Nitocris was a woman who ruled in her own right, something which neither Nebuchadnezzar's nor Nabonidus' wife did.

There have been several studies of the question, though. Some of these are not easily accessible, but it is rather surprising that Shea refers to none of them. The Nitocris figure is important for Dan 5 because it illustrates how a historical figure can enter the domain of legend. H. Lewy suggested Nitocris was a combination of the wife of Shamshi-adad V (who also appears in the Semiramis legend) and the wife of Sennacherib who, as Esarhaddon's mother, may have ruled on her own as regent for a period of years.¹⁷ Another proposal is that she was the mother of Nabonidus.¹⁸ These suggestions are of less consequence than recognizing the process by which such legends grow up in popular tradition, of which there are many examples in the Greek accounts of the ancient Near

¹⁷H. Lewy, "Nitokris-Naqī'a," *JNES* 11 (1952):264-286.

¹⁸W. Röllig, "Nitokris von Babylon," *Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte und deren Nachleben*, Festschrift für Franz Altheim zum 6.10. 1968, 2 vols., ed. R. Stiehl and H. E. Stier (Berlin, 1969):1.127-135.

East.¹⁹ As Shea states, there is probably much legendary material associated with the Nitocris figure but evidently a historical core. Of course, this is precisely how most scholars would see the Belshazzar figure of Dan 5: much legendary material but a historical core!

5. *Conclusions*

This brief article has addressed only some of the issues relating to Dan 5 and Belshazzar. I have been careful not to attribute to Shea arguments which he has not used. Rowley took up a number of other such arguments advanced in an attempt to defend the historicity of Dan 5, but there is no indication that Shea adheres to these. In any case, it seems to me that the question of Belshazzar's death and kingship are the really vital ones.

All theories have to be defended, not only on internal grounds, but on their utility compared with possible alternative theories. One can attempt to develop theories which defend the historicity of the Belshazzar of Daniel with greater or lesser cogency. But, ultimately, the question is which of several possible theories is most likely in the light of current knowledge. Our knowledge is and always will be incomplete; in the light of present knowledge, however, I would suggest that the *most likely* theory is that Dan 5 draws on certain historical remembrances of Belshazzar but is itself largely an unhistorical account whose aim is primarily theological.

¹⁹See, e.g., H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa: Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (London, 1983), pp. 20-33.