

Daniel 1-6 and History

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Current discussions on *Daniel* in commentaries and Old Testament introductions commonly consider the stories of Daniel and his Three Friends to be traditional tales originating "in the eastern Jewish Diaspora during the Hellenistic period".¹ The assumed Maccabean author of Daniel then utilized them to encourage the faithful in a time of persecution. A minority opinion, most ably forwarded by H. H. Rowley, holds that the author of Daniel himself "made use of traditions older than his day, but moulded them to serve his purpose".² Clearly both views adopt a second century B.C. dating for the book, but for chapters 1 to 6 the basic reasons are historical and linguistic, whereas for the later chapters the question of detailed predictive prophecy is central. It is to historical aspects of the stories that this essay is directed. Before turning to them, however, attention may be drawn to the linguistic argument based upon the Aramaic of Daniel in the light of K. A. Kitchen's conclusion: "there is nothing to decide the date of composition of the Aramaic of Daniel *on the grounds of Aramaic* anywhere between the late sixth and the second century B.C.... It is equally obscurantist to exclude dogmatically a sixth-fifth (or fourth) century date on the one hand, or to hold such a date as mechanically proven on the other, *as far as the Aramaic is concerned*."³

Although H. H. Rowley contested Kitchen's findings,⁴ they were supported, and Rowley's arguments refuted, by the leading Israeli Aramaist E. Y. Kutscher in his major survey of the state of research of early Aramaic, and have been favourably received by other

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linguists.⁵ So far as the Aramaic is concerned, therefore, the stories of Daniel may be dated anywhere in the Persian or early Hellenistic periods.

I. THE THIRD YEAR OF JEHOIAKIM

No new light can be thrown upon the difficulty presented by Daniel 1: 1: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Nebuchadnezzar only gained the upper hand in the west after the Battle of Carchemish, summer 605 B.C., then he "marched about victoriously in Hattu" (Syria-Palestine)

¹ G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London, 1970), p. 474.

² *The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1965), p. 276, n.1.

³ D. J. Wiseman *et al.*, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London, 1965), p. 79 [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/book_daniel.html].

⁴ In a review, *J. of Semitic Studies* 11 (1966), pp. 112-6.

⁵ E. Y. Kutscher in T. A. Seboek (ed.), *Current Trends in Linguistics* 6 (The Hague, 1970), pp. 400-3; M. Sokoloff, *The Targum of Job from Qumran Cave XI* (Ramat Gan, 1974), p. 9, n.1.

that winter, i.e. 605-4 B.C.⁶ There is no likelihood of any Babylonian activity so far south as Judah prior to the Battle of Carchemish, for the area was subject to Egypt.

Jehoiakim was placed upon the throne by Necho of Egypt some months after the death of Josiah at the Battle of Megiddo which occurred about June, 609 B.C. Upon Josiah's death the people made his younger son Jehoahaz king, but his reign ended after three months when Necho replaced him with his half-brother, Jehoiakim. Accordingly, Jehoiakim ascended the throne in September-October 609 B.C., or a little earlier if the months of Jehoahaz were not three whole months. That much may be regarded as certain. Despite the quantity of detailed information for the last three decades of Judah's life, there is no certainty about the method of reckoning the following regnal years. Thus the last year of king A might also be the first year of king B, the non-accession year system, making 609 B.C. Josiah's last and Jehoiakim's first. Alternatively, the last year of king A might be termed the Accession Year of king B, his first year commencing with the next New Year's Day, the accession year system, making 609 B.C. Josiah's last, 608 Jehoiakim's first. Further to complicate our problem, there is dispute over the date of the New Year in Judah. Some claim it began in the spring month of Nisan (March-April), others in the autumn month of Tishri (September-October). D. J. A. Clines has recently argued strongly for the former;⁷ the eminent Israeli historian A. Malamat maintains the latter.⁸ Now

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the spring New Year would mean Jehoiakim's first year covered 609-March 608 on the non-accession year system, his second 608-7, his third 607-6; on the accession year system his first year ran from March 608 to March 607, his second 607-6, his third 606-April 605. Thus any advance by Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem after the Battle of Carchemish would have fallen in Jehoiakim's fourth year. Equally, an autumn New Year would mean Jehoiakim's first year could have fallen in 610-609 or 609-8, for we do not know exactly when he acceded, bringing his third year to 608-7 or 607-6, on the non-accession year system. However, on the accession year system and with an autumnal New Year, his first year would run from September 608 to September 607, his second 607-6, his third September 606-October 605. This last would just accommodate the statement of Daniel 1: 1 in chronological terms. If the autumn New Year or the accession year dating are not acceptable, then there is probably no alternative to assuming an error in the figure of this verse. Yet the fact that it is possible to reckon the date as 605 B.C. belies the claim that "the very first statement in chapter 1 can be shown to be inaccurate".⁹ The absence of any record of a siege of Jerusalem by Babylonian forces in this year is not a strong argument against its happening.

The date given by Jeremiah 25: 1, "the fourth year of Jehoiakim... (that was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar...)", is in harmony, for, following the Babylonian accession year system, Nebuchadnezzar's first year ran from April 604 to March 603 B.C., overlapping the latter half of

⁶ Babylonian Chronicle BM 21946, obv. 12, 13; D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings* (London, 1956), p. 68; newly edited by A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles, Texts from Cuneiform Sources*, V (New York, 1975), p. 100.

⁷ *Australian J. of Biblical Archaeology* 2 (1972), pp. 9-34; *J. of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974), pp. 22-40.

⁸ *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 28, Congress Volume, Edinburgh, 1974 (Leiden, 1975), p. 124 and n. 2.

⁹ N. Porteous, *Daniel, A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (London, 1965), pp. 25 f.

Jehioakim's fourth year (to late September 604), and the Babylonian Chronicle tells that Nebuchadnezzar was in the west from June 604 until the next January. Jeremiah 46: 2 remains difficult, for the defeat of Necho at Carchemish is there placed in the fourth year of Jehoiakim, suiting the spring New Year and the accession year system.

II. THE CHALDAEANS

Use of this term for a special class of learned men in Daniel is an "undoubted anachronism" for the time of Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁰ The word in 5: 30, "Belshazzar the Chaldaean king", and in 9: 1, "the realm of the Chaldaeans", has an ethnic connotation, and that may be true of the phrase "the letters and language of the Chaldaeans" in 1: 4. Every other occurrence in Daniel carries the specialized sense of a category amongst the wise men, sometimes standing for the whole body; cf. 2: 2, 4, 10 etc. The same restricted meaning occurs in Herodotus, *Histories* 1: 181f., where the Chaldaeans are priests of

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Bel. This limited meaning, it is argued, could have developed only after the Chaldaeans had ceased to have any significance as a people or a power, that is, when the Persian Empire was fully established. Admittedly, the ethnic use did continue to be current much later, preserved in the Old Testament writings, and used by historians such as Strabo at the end of the first century B.C.

Were Chaldaean a normal gentilic in sixth century B.C. Babylonia, attested in contemporary documents, with no trace of the specialized use, *Daniel's* mode of employing it might be considered anachronistic, but beside the fact that there is no evidence for Chaldaean as a professional name in Babylonian texts should be noted the complete absence of the word as an ethnic term from the royal inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar, his father, and his successors. In Assyrian records of the eighth and seventh centuries it is used as the overall name for a group of tribes often mentioned separately. In this situation it is as improper to label the professional sense of Chaldaean a sixth-century usage as it is to call it an anachronism.

A possible analogy can be found amongst the Medes. According to Herodotus, they were a group of six tribes (1.101). One of the tribes was called the Magi. Now the Magi are well known as religious functionaries in the Persian Empire, and as the eponyms of all magicians. Their early history is obscure. R. N. Frye wrote "One may tentatively suggest that the Magi were a 'tribe' of the Medes who exercised sacerdotal functions. During the supremacy of the Medes they expanded over the Median empire as a priesthood since the priestly trade was kept, so to speak, 'in the family'".¹¹ Perhaps something similar was true of the Chaldaeans.

"Chaldaean" has passed into English from Greek and Latin, the Greek being a correct transliteration of the Babylonian **kaldāyu*. In Hebrew the form differs: *kaśidim*. The variation is explicable in the light of historical development within Babylonian and Assyrian. From the mid-

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 28, following the majority of commentators.

¹¹ *The Heritage of Persia* (London, 1962), p. 76.

second millennium B.C. onwards the combination of sibilant + dental was often written as *I* + dental, revealing a phonetic shift probably universal in the spoken language though concealed by scribal conservatism in many of the texts that survive.¹² This shift accounts well for the difference between the Akkadian and Greek forms and the Hebrew which was unaffected by it, deriving from the Chaldaeans themselves, or from a time before the shift had occurred. Again, to view "Chaldaean" as "taken from the Greek

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rendering of the Hebrew *kasidim* and corresponding more accurately to the original *kaldu*" appears unjust to the Hebrew-Aramaic text of *Daniel*.¹³

III. BELSHAZZAR

Recovery of Babylonian texts demonstrated the existence of Belshazzar, son of Nabonidus, last king of Babylon. None designates him "king"; many show he occupied an unusual position as regent during his father's absence for some ten years in Arabia. Nabonidus "entrusted the kingship" to him, his name accompanies his father's in oath formulae, and both are coupled in prayers on foundation documents.¹⁴ H. H. Rowley asserted that the failure of any of these texts to give Belshazzar the title "king", and of any other evidence for his reigning as monarch to appear, proved the author of Daniel was in error; E. J. Young countered that Daniel is not an official document written by Babylonian scribes, and so could represent an effective situation rather than a state position.¹⁵

Commentators have been at a loss to account for the date of ch. 8, "In the third year of King Belshazzar". If it be taken at its face value, the year would be 550-49 B.C., reckoning from the fourth year of Nabonidus when he "entrusted the kingship" to his son. That was the year in which Cyrus of Persia finally overcame his nominal suzerain, Astyages the Mede, and established the joint state of the Medes and Persians.¹⁶ That is to say, the events of the vision were beginning at the time they were revealed, the higher horn of the ram was now rising above the other.

While cuneiform texts plainly name Nabonidus as the father of Belshazzar, Daniel 5: 11, 18 give that place to Nebuchadnezzar. Of course, "father" may stand for grandfather, or for a more remote ancestor in Semitic languages, but it is objected that Nabonidus was not a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar; in fact he was a usurper. He took the throne from Labashi-Marduk, son of

¹² See W. von Soden, *Grundriss der Akkadischen Grammatik, Analecta Orientalia* 33, 47 (Rome, 1969), para. 30g. Cf. W. F. Leemans, *Jaarbericht* No. 10, *Ex Oriente Lux* (1945-8), p. 437; H. W. F. Saggs, *Iraq* 22 (1960), p. 206, n.39.

¹³ Porteous, *Daniel*, p. 28. For the accurate representation of Assyrian dialect forms in biblical Hebrew see my paper in *J. of Semitic Studies* 21 (1976), pp. 1-14.

¹⁴ The material was collected by R. P. Dougherty, *Nabonidus and Belshazzar, Yale Oriental Series, Researches* 15 (New Haven, 1929).

¹⁵ H. H. Rowley, *J. of Theological Studies* 32 (1930), pp. 12-31; E. J. Young, *A Commentary on Daniel* (Grand Rapids, 1949, London 1972), pp. 115 ff. For Nabonidus' period in Arabia see W. G. Lambert in *Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar for Arabian Studies, Oxford, 1971* (London, 1972), pp. 53-64.

¹⁶ Noted by S. Smith, *Isaiah Chapters XL-LV* (London, 1944), p. 125, n. 41.

Neriglissar, in 556 B.C. Neriglissar had himself usurped the throne of Amel-Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar's son, in 560 B.C. Now Neriglissar was a high-ranking officer in Nebuchadnezzar's court (he appears in Jeremiah 39), who had married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁷ There are hints that Nabonidus also held high office at that time; the inscrip-

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tion honouring his mother, who lived for 104 years, claims that she forwarded his career in the courts of Nebuchadnezzar and Neriglissar.¹⁸ As a speculation, it may be suggested that Nabonidus, too, was a son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, putting him in as good a place to take the throne as Neriglissar. Then the mother of Belshazzar would have been a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. But this remains speculation until more evidence is available.

IV. BABYLONIAN NAMES

Daniel and his three friends each received a Babylonian name upon arrival at the court. Commentators and linguists have been unable to explain these names adequately, and have assumed they represent bowdlerized forms of Babylonian originals containing names of pagan gods objectionable to Jewish scribes. Recently an Assyriologist has shown they can be explained satisfactorily from Babylonian onomastics without supposing any alteration. Shadrach represents *šādurāku*, "I am very fearful (of God)"; Meshach *mēšāku* "I am of little account"; Abed-nego apparently an Aramaic form meaning "servant of the shining one", possibly involving word-play on an Akkadian name including the god Nabû.¹⁹ Daniel's name Belteshazzar is said in 4: 8 to refer to the god of Nebuchadnezzar. A common understanding takes the name as *balatšu-ušur* "May he (a god) protect his life". Then 4: 8 is supposed to be "a false etymology... though, of course, Bel may indeed be the suppressed subject of the verb *ušur*".²⁰ Re-examination shows the name is far better explained as *bēlet-šar-ušur* "Lady, protect the king", Bēlet being a title for the wife of Marduk or Bēl, the patron of Babylon.²¹ Further, in the Babylonian of the sixth century B.C., as in earlier times, the juncture of dental and sibilant produced a double sibilant, *i.e.* *balassu*, so that the *teth* would not appear in an alphabetic transcription (cf. above on the Chaldaeans), and this form is found in the Aramaic transcription of the name Ninurta-balassu-igbi on an ostrakon from Nippur as *'nwštbls'gb*, although this comes from the fifth century B.C.²² Babylonian scribes frequently wrote the form as it was pronounced, too, beside writing it with the etymological spelling *balat-šu*.

The same Assyriological study sets out evidence for the shift

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¹⁷ D. Weisberg in P. Garelli (ed.), *Le Palais et la Royauté, Compte rendu de la XIX^e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* (Paris, 1974), pp. 447-454.

¹⁸ J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton³, 1969), p. 561.

¹⁹ P.-R. Berger, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 64 (1975), pp. 224-34.

²⁰ Porteous, *Daniel*, p. 28; cf. p. 67: "erroneously stated to contain the name of the god Bel".

²¹ Berger, *Zeits. Ass.* 64, pp. 226-34.

²² J. A. Montgomery, *J. of American Oriental Soc.* 29 (1908), pp. 204-9.

from *r* to *n* in the name of Nebuchadnezzar-Nebuchadnezzar, demonstrating that the writing with *n* is not improper for Hebrew.²³

V. OTHER QUESTIONS

Other debated questions of history raised by Daniel await future clarification. Growing knowledge of the administration and customs of the Persian Empire may throw more light on the major problem of Darius the Mede. The mists covering Median culture are receding slowly, and as they go, the role of that culture in Achaemenid times is seen to be larger than hitherto believed, perhaps adding weight to D. J. Wiseman's proposal that Darius the Mede is to be identified with Cyrus the Persian,²⁴ and rendering ever less likely the concept of an independent Median world-empire after the Fall of Babylon.

Confusion and error over the history of the Persian period found in other early Jewish writings are often adduced as parallels for Daniel's supposed insertion of a Median Empire.²⁵ The historical muddle in the Book of Judith, which has Nebuchadnezzar as king of Assyria (!) in his twelfth year (1: 1), yet supposes its action to occur after the Exile (4: 3) is an obvious one. On the other hand, the points made in this essay, and other undisputed historical data in the book, show that *Daniel* retains a high proportion of correct detail, contrasting with the second-century B.C. Judith and later works, and taking its place beside the much earlier Story of Ahiqar which accurately reflects the Assyrian court and Assyrian pronunciation of personal names as opposed to Babylonian.

Ancient documents are precious relics of mankind, they deserve to be treated with the utmost respect. When there seems to be disagreement the easiest solution into assume error, and error there may be, but that assumption should never pass unquestioned unless the evidence offered is clear and unambiguous. Where the case concerns a matter for which there is no certain information outside the text in question, or mere matters of opinion, any firm conclusion is to be avoided. When considerations of one sort lead to a second-century B.C. date for the book of Daniel, that is no reason for treating everything in the book that relates to earlier days as likely to be valueless. If these paragraphs encourage a more positive approach to the early chapters of Daniel more of their value will surely be realized.

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²³ Berger, *Zeits. Ass.* 64, pp. 227-30, *contra* Porteous, *Daniel*, p. 26: "inaccurate spelling", p. 135, n.1, "incorrect spelling".

²⁴ *Notes on Some Problems...*, pp. 9-16; J. M. Bulman, *Westminster Theological J.* 35 (1972-3), pp. 247-67.

²⁵ Beside the commentaries see G. R. Driver in F. F. Bruce (ed.), *Promise and Fulfilment, Essays Presented to Professor S. H. Hooke* (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 72 ff.