

CHAPTER FIVE

The Medes and Persians

The Medo-Persian problem is a subject which needs a chapter to itself. The problem is a) the question of whether Daniel separates the Medes and Persians or whether he considers them only as one nation, and b) the question of whether there was a genuine Median kingdom between those of Babylon and Persia. The latter question has been dealt with already; so in this chapter I shall concentrate mainly on the former.

What the Bible says

Before we consider what Daniel says, let us see what earlier prophets say concerning the downfall of Babylon.

‘The Lord has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it ...’ (Jeremiah 51:11)

‘Prepare the nations for war against her, the kings of the Medes, with their governors and deputies, and every land under their dominion.’ (Jeremiah 51:28)

‘Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them.’ (Isaiah 13:17)

‘Go up, O Elam, lay siege, O Media ...’ (Isaiah 21:2)

These passages single out Media as the nation which God would stir up against Babylon, but as noted in an earlier chapter, we are told that Elam also would be involved in its actual overthrow. Eastern Elam was occupied by the Persian race at this time and was Cyrus’ place of origin. He succeeded his father on the throne of Anshan, but soon added the province of Persia to his possessions. He overthrew the Median king and in partnership with the Medes eventually conquered Babylon.

Now Daniel appears to support these prophecies, because he makes a special point of repeatedly emphasizing that Darius, the new king of Babylon, is a Mede.

‘And Darius the Mede received the kingdom ...’ (Daniel 5:31)

‘... Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by birth a Mede, who became king over the realm of the Chaldeans ...’ (Daniel 9:1)

‘... Darius the Mede ...’ (Daniel 11:1)

Daniel states clearly that Babylon is conquered by the allied Medes and Persians (5:28; 6:8), but he emphasizes that the new king is a *Mede*. We are given the *impression* (whatever the precise situation may have been) that the Babylonian kings were succeeded by a Median king and then the Persian kings. This is only a superficial impression (as will be shown further on in this chapter), but it may well be intentional. The book of Daniel seems to be making a curious and unmistakable point of emphasizing and spotlighting the part played by Media in the early administration of Babylon, following the latter’s defeat. This suggests that the book intends Media to be regarded as the successor of Babylon. I am not saying that the kingdom of Darius *was* the Median kingdom. I am merely suggesting that the book of Daniel uses Darius to get across the idea that Media was the second of the four world powers.

The vision of the ram and the he-goat shows that in fact Persia was dominant when Babylon was finally overthrown; but as noted already, the second kingdom did not begin with Babylon’s final overthrow. *It began with the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign.* The first

kingdom's period of power corresponds only to the empire of Nebuchadnezzar. In the vision of the image, the first kingdom is specifically identified with Nebuchadnezzar himself. The second vision points to the same person without actually naming him. Interpreters usually, if not always, assume that Nebuchadnezzar represents the whole Neo-Babylonian empire. This assumption would be quite reasonable if it were not for the existence of the Medo-Persian problem. The question of whether or not the first kingdom's power is limited to the time of Nebuchadnezzar is crucial — and the Bible is absolutely specific in stating that the first kingdom is to be identified with Nebuchadnezzar himself. This totally invalidates the objection that there was no Median empire between those of Babylon and Persia.

It is said by some interpreters that because Daniel never specifically mentions an independent Median empire, the second of his kingdoms cannot have been that empire. Note, however, that Daniel had little or no personal contact with Media during her short period of supreme power, and also 2:39 indicates that the second kingdom was relatively insignificant. It is not surprising, therefore, that Daniel makes little mention of independent Media. I say 'little' mention, because he does refer to the independent Median empire in the vision of the ram and the he-goat. He tells us that he saw a ram with two horns. He sees that both horns are high, but one is higher than the other, and the higher came up last. The explanation that Daniel is given contains a direct reference to the Median empire which preceded the Persian empire. He is told that one horn represents the kings of Media. This horn came up *first* and must therefore represent the kings of *the Median empire*. The other horn represents the kings of Persia. The latter horn came up after the first horn and must therefore represent the kings of the Persian empire.

However, orthodox interpreters rightly point out that these Median and Persian horns both appear on one beast. This has already been discussed in the previous chapter; but more can be said. It is clear that the ram is primarily meant to symbolize the Medo-Persian empire created by Cyrus in 550 B.C. — it was initially described as a two-horned ram standing in Elam, the land of Cyrus' origin, in about 550 B.C. But it does also refer to the earlier supremacy of Media. Orthodox interpreters conclude therefore that the Medes and Persians are here considered to be one people, both before and after 550 B.C. — that is, during the years of both the Median empire and the Medo-Persian empire. This conclusion could be correct as far as it goes; but these interpreters go further. They insist that because *this* vision appears to depict the Medes and Persians as one people throughout their history, they must likewise be considered one people in the other visions also. They insist that Media and Persia can never be separated — Media must always be considered a part of Medo-Persia.

In a certain very limited sense, perhaps, the Medes and Persians *were* always a unity. They were of similar racial stock, lived similar steppe-dwelling lives and were geographical neighbours. In this sense we could perhaps say they were a unity even before the time of Cyrus. This truth (as well as the partnership created by Cyrus) *may* be symbolized by the two-horned ram. It is also true, however, that the Medes and Persians were two quite distinct and separate peoples with different empires. There is no good reason why this latter truth should not have been symbolized in the visions of the image and four beasts, and the former truth in the vision of the ram. The bear and leopard could have symbolized one truth and the two-horned ram another truth.

Daniel saw the vision of the ram in the third year of the reign of Belshazzar (about 550 B.C.), *the very time at which the Medes and Persians united as allies*. Cyrus' amalgamation of Media and Persia was a very excellent reason for altering the symbolism in such a way as to depict the unity of the Medes and Persians. When the visions of the image and four beasts were seen, Media was a powerful independent empire; but when Daniel saw the vision of the ram and he-goat, *the Medo-Persian situation had completely changed* (or was just about to),

and a change of symbolism was altogether appropriate.

It has already been shown in the previous chapter that the description of the two horns is, in any case, probably little more than a historical note about the two peoples brought together in Cyrus' empire. Those who seek to prove the orthodox interpretation by emphasizing the unity of the Medes and Persians in the ram tend to overlook the fact that the beast *primarily represents the empire created by Cyrus*. It is doubtful whether the ram is meant to show, even in a minor sense, that the Medes and Persians were always united. But whichever way we take it, the vision is quite compatible with the Babylon-Media-Persia-Greece interpretation.

To summarize, we can say that through Darius the Mede Daniel consistently depicts the Medes as following the Babylonians. In this he is supported by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. In the vision of the ram he refers directly to the Median empire which preceded the Medo-Persian empire. It is true that he depicts the Medes and Persians as one people in this vision; but this is simply because they were at that very time uniting under the leadership of Cyrus. The vision clearly indicates that Persian rule was preceded by Median rule.

Further implications of Daniel 8

I have argued that the vision of the ram and the he-goat differs from the earlier visions in depicting a united Medo-Persia. I have noted also that this vision was seen at about the very time when the two nations actually united.

This change of symbolism at this particular time is in fact a remarkable touch of authenticity which supports the book's claim that it was written in the sixth century B.C. If the author lived in the second century B.C. and was as confused about Medo-Persian history as the critics say he was, how did he manage to give the vision this particular date? And how did he know that it was the third year of the reign of Belshazzar — someone the Greek historians had never even heard of?

This vision does not support the critical view that Daniel was confused about Medo-Persian history. According to the critics, the author inserted the Median kingdom (which they identify with the kingdom of Darius) between the reigns of Belshazzar and Cyrus. But as we have seen, the book of Daniel clearly indicates that Babylon was overthrown by a united Medo-Persia (5:28; 6:8). Furthermore, the vision of chapter 8 clearly indicates that the *Persians* were dominant in this partnership. And more than this, it indicates the actual year in which they became dominant! Is it just a coincidence that the vision took place in the third year of Belshazzar — the very time when Cyrus conquered the Medes and established his empire?

In fact this vision provides an important clue which helps us to solve the problem of Media's place in the prophecies. As we have seen, chapter 8 indicates that Daniel had a vision in which the first thing he saw (apart from certain geographical details) was a newly-formed Persian empire on the threshold of conquest. The vision took place in about 550 B.C., the very year in which the Persian empire actually was created. The vision was therefore a prophecy of what was going to happen *from that very time*. If the dominance of Persia was just beginning, then *the dominance of Babylon and Media must have passed already*. The first kingdom (Babylon) had already been identified with Nebuchadnezzar. Therefore the dominance of Media must have extended from the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 B.C. to the rise of Persia in 550 B.C.

Why include the Median empire?

In spite of all this, one is still left with the feeling that it would have been simpler to have only three kingdoms, instead of four — that is, Babylon, Medo-Persia and Greece. Why do the

visions of the image and the four beasts complicate the issue by bringing in the Median empire at all? It could have been left out quite easily without damaging the picture of the historical setting of Christ's coming. This question has been dealt with already in chapter 2. *The pattern of four successive ages, symbolized by metals of diminishing strength or value, was already in existence* — in the work of the eighth century Greek poet Hesiod, for example. God chose to take symbolism which was already well known in the ancient world, and to adapt and use it for His own purposes. By using the imagery of secular literature, God was showing that human, secular history is controlled by Him and is leading up to the consummation ordained by Him. God is in control, and His triumph and the eventual vindication of His saints is certain.

However, this still leaves us with the question, 'Why did God choose Greece to be the fourth kingdom, and not Rome?' If Rome were the fourth we would have our four kingdoms without having to separate Media and Persia. The answer probably lies in the facts 1) that the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes made a deliberate attempt to stamp out true religion, and it was natural to see the hand of God in his defeat and death, and 2) that the destruction of the Greek empire was followed by the coming of Christ and His kingdom. Apart from predicting the historical setting of Christ's coming, the prophecies were meant to show that the kingdoms of this world would be destroyed by God and followed by His everlasting kingdom. Bound up with this is the probability that these events of a past age are meant to typify events immediately preceding Christ's second advent. The book of Revelation seems to indicate that the second advent also will be preceded by a period of greatly increased persecution of God's people — possibly by some Antiochus-like 'Antichrist'.

The Roman empire completely fails to meet these criteria. When Christ came, the Roman empire was still expanding and full of vigour. It reached its greatest extent and was at the zenith of its power more than a century *after* the birth of Christ. Even then, it was another three hundred years before the western empire collapsed. The eastern part of the empire went on for another thousand years. Furthermore, both parts of the empire were nominally Christian when they fell.

Critical scholars have their own explanation as to why Greece was chosen as the fourth empire; but enough has been said about this in the introductory chapter. We can say in conclusion that the separation of Media and Persia in chapters 2 and 7 is fully compatible with their union in chapters 5, 6 and 8, and involves no inconsistency or self-contradiction.

What non-Biblical records say

Having seen what the Bible says, let us see what other historical records tell us. The Medes and Chaldeans together broke the power of Assyria when they destroyed Nineveh in 612 B.C. Assyria was finally obliterated when Harran fell to the Chaldeans in 610 B.C. and the Assyrians failed to recapture it in 609 B.C. The Chaldeans took the Land of the Two Rivers and Syria-Palestine, forming the Neo-Babylonian empire, whilst the Medes established a powerful empire to the north and east.

The Median empire was a constant threat to the wealthier Babylonian empire, but while Nebuchadnezzar was king, Babylon was rich and strong. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C. Babylon declined, and *Media became the dominant power*. Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, tried to stave off the threat from Media by forming an alliance with the small, but growing, kingdom of Persia (a vassal of Media), whose ruler was Cyrus. However, a certain section of the Medians revolted against Astyages, the king of Media, in favour of Cyrus, who was related to the royal house of Media either by descent or marriage. Thus Cyrus, in alliance with these Medians, defeated Astyages in 550 B.C. and was installed as 'king of the Medes'

(a title ascribed to him by Nabonidus). Cyrus adopted the Median royal regalia and settled for a time in Ecbatana, the Median capital. He placed both Medes and Persians in positions of high authority. Thus Media and Persia were united as allies. From this time, however, the Persians increased in power until they became completely dominant. We can see therefore that there was a Median empire and a Persian empire, but during the earlier years of the latter empire, the Medes were the allies of the Persians rather than their subjects.

Cyrus continued his triumphant progress and defeated Lydia in 546 B.C. and, after other conquests in the east, Babylon in 539 B.C. Immediately after defeating Babylon he appointed a man named Gubaru (not to be confused with the Ugbaru who captured Babylon) as governor of 'Babylon and the land beyond the river'. Gubaru in turn appointed sub-governors. This man Gubaru may have been either a Mede or a Persian, as Cyrus had a habit of appointing both Medes and Persians to positions of high authority. It is clear from various tablets the archaeologists have unearthed that Gubaru exercised very considerable authority within his vast satrapy of 'Babylon and the land beyond the river'. In fact it may truly be said that within his satrapy he exercised the authority of a king, although he remained subordinate to the higher authority of Cyrus and, later, Cambyses. In 530 B.C. Cyrus died on campaign in the far north-east and his son Cambyses became head of the Persian empire. He proceeded to add Egypt to the territory of the empire, but in 522 B.C., on the way back from the campaign, he committed suicide when he heard that a pretender had taken the throne in his absence. This man claimed to be a brother of Cambyses who had actually been killed some time previously. However, within two months a cousin of Cambyses named Darius succeeded in capturing and killing the pretender. During his reign, Darius annexed Thrace and large parts of Sind and the Punjab. He was succeeded in 486 B.C. by his son Xerxes. This man was notable for his invasion of Greece. He moved into that country with a huge army, but after some initial successes he was crushingly defeated in successive battles and forced out of Europe. He was eventually assassinated in 465 B.C. and succeeded by a son, Artaxerxes Longimanus.

The most striking aspect of the Persian empire was the huge area it covered. The previous empires had all been but a fraction of the size of this vast structure. It reached its greatest extent during the reigns of Darius and Xerxes and its decline can be dated from the latter's defeat by the Greeks. Its period of greatness therefore covered the reigns of its first four kings, Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius and Xerxes.

Summary

It is clear that the picture Daniel gives is completely accurate in every detail except, apparently, that of Darius the Mede. Neither the Greek historians nor the cuneiform tablets make any mention of a king by this name who ruled in Babylon from 539 B.C. Consequently critical scholars regard Darius the Mede as a figment of the author's fertile imagination — or a 'conflation of confused traditions', to quote H. H. Rowley.¹ However, J. C. Whitcomb² has paid careful attention to the findings of archaeology and has shown that there is good reason to believe that Darius the Mede was actually Gubaru, the governor of Babylon.

Daniel calls Darius a 'king', but perhaps merely in the sense that he also calls Belshazzar the 'king'. Belshazzar exercised the authority of a king in Babylon, although he remained subordinate to his father Nabonidus, and is always called 'the son of the king' in the cuneiform records — never 'the king'. That Belshazzar was the second ruler in Babylonia is, however, revealed by the fact that he was unable to offer Daniel a position higher than that of the third ruler in the kingdom (5:7, 16, 29). Similarly, the fact that Darius 'received' the kingdom (5:31) and 'was made' king (9:1, R.V.) may indicate that he also occupied a subordinate position. As far as their subjects were concerned, however, Belshazzar and Gubaru wielded the authority of the kings who had reigned before them. Thus when Daniel

describes Darius as the king, it is quite possible that he is merely according him the title he was popularly known by in the realm of Babylon and the land beyond the river. He does not tell us what his official Persian title was, as he uses the Aramaic word for 'king', but he does give us the official Persian title of the sub-governors (satraps) he appointed.

We may well ask why Daniel chooses not to mention the fact that Darius was (if he was Gubaru) himself a governor appointed by the Persian Cyrus. It cannot be denied that the effect is one of making Media appear to be the successor of Babylon. The facts are all perfectly accurate, but they seem to be presented in such a way as to convey the idea of a Babylon--Media-Persia sequence.

The main problem with the Gubaru theory is the matter of the name. Why is the man called Darius rather than Gubaru? One suggestion is that he did in fact have both names. Another suggestion is that 'Darius' is here a scribal corruption of 'Gubaru'.³ It should be mentioned that among other theories there is one that Darius the Mede may have been Cyrus himself.⁴ In my opinion this is unlikely, but if it were true it would make Daniel's insistence on his Median origin even more strange and doubly significant. Despite his Median connections, Cyrus was undoubtedly a Persian, and is always depicted as such by the Bible. Whatever the correct answer may be, we can trust that time will yet again prove 'the Bible was right after all'. This is what happened with regard to Belshazzar, whose existence used to be denied by the — until the archaeologists found out who he was. Far from indicating the unreliability of the book of Daniel, Belshazzar now helps to show that it is both reliable and of ancient origin. The writer clearly had a much closer acquaintance with Babylonian times than did the Greek historians. The latter were unaware that Belshazzar even existed.

According to the Greek historians, Babylon was captured by a Babylonian named Gobryas, who had defected to Cyrus. This man was then appointed governor of 'Babylon and the land beyond the river'. The cuneiform records have revealed, however, that the Greek historians were wrong. Babylon was captured by a man named Ugbaru (who may have been the above-mentioned Babylonian); but he died three weeks later, and it was a different person, Gubaru, who became the governor. It is extremely likely that this Gubaru was none other than 'Darius the Mede'.

It is quite extraordinary how the critics have failed to learn from the affair of Belshazzar, and have continued to insist that Darius the Mede cannot have been a historical person. The confirmation of Belshazzar's existence teaches us at least two things relevant to the problem of Darius the Mede. One is that the author of the book of Daniel had very special knowledge of people and events around the time of the fall of Babylon — knowledge which the Greek historians did not possess. The other is that we should be very cautious about saying that a Biblical statement is inaccurate, or that a Biblical character is unhistorical. Archaeology is constantly bringing new evidence to light — and quite frequently it confirms the truth of Biblical statements which were previously uncorroborated or thought to be inaccurate.

Darius the Mede has not yet been identified with absolute certainty; but there is every reason to believe that he was a historical person, and that the author of the book of Daniel knew exactly what he was writing about when he described the Medes and Persians.

Up to this point, the chapter remains as it was in the first edition. But I will add a few further comments now concerning the identity of Darius the Mede. One other suggestion (concerning this identity) is that Darius, Gubaru and Ugbaru were one and the same person.⁵ If this suggestion were correct, it would mean that Darius died less than a month after entering Babylon, and perhaps only a few days after being appointed governor. The time which this allows for the events described in the book of Daniel is hardly adequate. Those events included the appointment of 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three

administrators over them, followed by the affair of Daniel in the lions' den. An even greater drawback to this suggestion is that according to other cuneiform records, Gubaru governed Babylonia for many years!

Many authors assume that Gubaru and Ugbaru are the same person; but as far as I can see, Whitcomb is right to make a distinction between the two. The cuneiform records seem to indicate very clearly that they were two different people. S. Eiger has summarized the evidence as follows:

'The Nabonidus Chronicle says that Ugbaru "the governor of Gutium and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without battle." Then, after relating Cyrus' entry into the city 17 days later, the inscription states that Gubaru, "his governor, installed governors in Babylon." Note that the names "Ugbaru" and "Gubaru" are not the same. While they appear to be similar in English, in the cuneiform the sign for the first syllable of Ugbaru's name is quite different from that for Gubaru. The Chronicle states that Ugbaru, the governor of Gutium, died within a few weeks of the conquest. Other cuneiform texts show that Gubaru continued living for 14 years as governor not only of the city of Babylon but of the entire region of Babylonia as well as of the "Region beyond the River". Gubaru was ruler over a region that extended the full length of the Fertile Crescent, basically the same area as that of the Babylonian Empire. Darius the Mede, it will be remembered, is spoken of as being "made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans", but not as "the king of Persia," the regular form for referring to King Cyrus (Daniel 10:1; Ezra 1:1, 2; 3:7; 4:3). So the region ruled by Gubaru would at least appear to be the same as that ruled by Darius the Mede.'⁶

In the literature, several other reasons why Darius the Mede can and should be identified as Gubaru have been given.⁷ The following examples address the two main objections (that Gubaru was not a king, and that his name was not Darius): 1) The ascription of the title 'king' to the governor of a province or city was a common practice. 2) There is no word more appropriate than *malka* ('king') in the Aramaic language for the governor of a sub-kingdom or province of the empire. Gubaru is called *pihatu* ('governor') in the cuneiform records; but these records are in the Akkadian language, not Aramaic. 3) The name 'Gubaru' could be a *translation* of 'Darius'. The same radical letters in Arabic mean 'king', 'compeller' or 'restrainer'. In Hebrew, derivations of the root mean 'lord', 'mistress' or 'queen', and in Aramaic, 'mighty' or 'almighty'.

In summary, I believe that Daniel is completely accurate concerning the Medes and Persians and Darius the Mede — and the liberal critics are wrong yet again. Although we do not yet know the exact reason for the Darius/Gubaru name difference, all other details are either accurate or, if not yet confirmed, entirely reasonable. However, they are presented in such a way as to convey the impression of a Babylon-Media-Persia sequence.

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1. H. H. Rowley, *Darius the Mede and the Four World Empires in the Book of Daniel*, (Cardiff, 1935).
 2. J. C. Whitcomb, *Darius the Mede*, (Eerdmans, 1959).
 3. This theory is set out in an unpublished manuscript by H. Owen, now deposited at the Tyndale House Library, Cambridge.
 4. D. J. Wiseman, *Notes on some Problems in the Book of Daniel*, (Tyndale Press). [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/book_daniel.html]
 5. William H. Shea, *Darius the Mede: An Update*, (Andrews University Seminary Studies 20, Autumn 1982), pp. 229-47.

6. S. Eiger, <http://lists.ibiblio.org/pipermail/b-hebrew/2000-February/006962.html>
7. See 'Darius' in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

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Revised and updated for the Web by the author.

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/book_god-in-control_gurney.html
