

The Search for Darius the Mede (Concluded), or, The Time of the Answer to Daniel’s Prayer and the Date of the Death of Darius the Mede

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After a brief flirtation with Cyrus as Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel,¹ I returned to an earlier position² identifying him with Ugbaru, the general who conquered Babylon for Cyrus.³ In my most recent study of this subject, however, a shift was made from a “long” chronology of Darius’ reign to a “short” chronology. Instead of assigning him a year and a month of rule after the fall of Babylon,⁴ his reign was reduced to approximately one month.⁵

This shift was necessitated by the recent publication of the Sippar tablets, which make it clear that the co-regency between Cambyses and Cyrus occurred during the latter king’s first full year of reign in Babylon.⁶ Thus, it was necessary to move the reign of Darius the Mede either earlier or later than the first year. Since the events described in Daniel indicate that they took place soon after the fall of Babylon, Darius should fit in the earlier period. This locates his short reign during the “accession year” of Cyrus, from October of 539 to the

¹ W. H. Shea, “Darius the Mede in His Persian-Babylonian Setting,” *AUSS* 29 (1991): 235-257.

² Idem., “An Unrecognized Vassal King of Babylon in the Early Achaemenid Period,” *AUSS* 9 (1970): 51-67; Id., *Ibid.*, pt. II, *AUSS* 9 (1971): 99-128, Id., *Ibid.*, pt. III, *AUSS* 10 (1972): 88-117; Id., *Ibid.*, pt. IV, *AUSS* 10 (1972): 147-178; Id., “Darius the Mede: An Update,” *AUSS* 20 (1982): 237-240.

³ Idem., “Nabonidus Chronicle: New Readings and the Identity of Darius the Mede,” *JATS* 7 (1996): 1-20.

⁴ Idem., “An Unrecognized Vassal,” pt. IV, 175-178.

⁵ Idem., “Nabonidus Chronicle,” 5-8.

⁶ Volumes 55, 56, and 57 of the British Museum publication, *Cuneiform Texts From the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum (CT)* (London: British Museum, 1959-). See my review of the relevant texts in “Darius the Mede in His Persian-Babylonian Setting,” 237, n. 7.

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new year in the spring of 538.⁷ During this period Cyrus carried only the title “King of Lands” (i.e., of the Persian Empire) in tablets written there, without the local title “King of Babylon.”⁸ That still leaves room for a short reign of Darius the Mede in this period.

In my most recent study on this subject, I considered the question of just how much time the biblical texts require for Darius’ reign. The answer is, not very much. The events of Dan 6 require less than a week, and Daniel’s prayer and Gabriel’s answer in Dan 9 need only a day. These events took place at some unspecified points in Darius’ first year (Dan 9:1), so we do not know how long that first year lasted. Co-regents do not have an “accession year,” since their first year begins at the point when the senior king appoints them as co-kings.⁹

In this present study the short reign of Darius is shrunk even further, from about one month to about one week. Also, when that is done a close integration of the biblical and Babylonian events results. When that shortening is accomplished, it provides further explanations of why those events took the course that they did.

Interpretation

Darius as Military Governor of Babylon. The name given to Cyrus’ general in the Nabonidus Chronicle varies. In one instance it is spelled as Ugbaru, in another instance it is spelled Gubaru, and in the third occurrence the first sign of the name is defective.¹⁰ Clearly the same individual is referred to in all three cases, and for convenience he is referred to here as Ugbaru.

Ugbaru was the general whose troops conquered Babylon on the 16th of Tishri, according to the Nabonidus Chronicles. This fits perfectly with the reference in Dan 5:31, which states that Darius the Mede “received” the kingdom when Belshazzar was slain, the night the city fell (v. 30). The verb used here (*qbl*) has been accurately translated as “received,” and it does not mean that he became king then. It only implies that he took over rule there on a temporary basis until Cyrus the full king arrived. Darius was, in effect, the trustee of the conquered kingdom until Cyrus came. In this span of two weeks, from 7/16 (i.e., 16th of Tishri, the seventh month) to 8/3 (i.e., 3rd of Marchesvan, the eighth month), he could best be described as the military governor.

⁷ R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Providence: Brown U, 1956), 29.

⁸ See parts I and II of the studies cited in n. 2 above.

⁹ We have the example right from this same period of Cambyses, where only the first year of his coregency shows up in the datelines on the tablets—no accession year texts. See n. 6 for the references. There are also the double dated texts from the 12th dynasty in Egypt, which show the same phenomenon.

¹⁰ In line 15 of column III of the Nabonidus Chronicle his name reads Ugbaru in reference to his conquest of Babylon. In line 20 his name is written as Gubaru when he appointed sub-governors. In line 22, which tells of his death, the first sign in his name was written defectively, but like the sign for Ug-. So his name there reads as X-ba-ru or (Ug)-ba-ru. *ANET*, 306.

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This interpretation requires one correction to the previous study. There it was advocated that the verb which referred to Ugbaru's troops guarding the temple area in this period meant that they kept the people out, in compliance with Darius' thirty-day decree concerning no prayers to any god.¹¹

I now revert back to the more traditional interpretation that Ugbaru's troops simply maintained the temple area in peace.¹² No disruption in the temple services took place at this time. The transition was an orderly one. Darius' thirty-day decree came later.

The Arrival of Cyrus and the Installation of Darius. The Nabonidus Chronicle dates the arrival of Cyrus in Babylon on 8/3. Crowds of people greeted him, apparently with jubilation. They saw him as a deliverer from the disliked Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar.

It is at this time that Cyrus, as the reigning authority, would have installed Ugbaru as vassal king in Babylon to rule jointly with him. Ugbaru took the throne name of Darius, by which he appears in the book of Daniel. Daniel refers to this event with the verb in Daniel 9:1 stating that Darius "was made king." This is the correct translation of the *hophal* verbal form, and the weaker translation "became king" (RSV, et al.) does not adequately capture the sense intended. He was made king by the agency of someone else, i.e. Cyrus.

Thus the two verbs used for Darius' rule in Babylon are very specific in their nature and refer to different actions at different points in time. Darius "received" the kingdom when he conquered it on 7/16, and he "was made king" there when Cyrus appointed him as vassal king or co-ruler.

In its next statement after the reference to Cyrus' arrival, the Chronicle still refers to Ugbaru as "his governor." Technically speaking, this is correct on two counts. First, he had been Cyrus' (military) governor in Babylon for the two preceding weeks. He may also have been a governor for Cyrus in some other province before this conquest. However, it was only Cyrus' appointment there on 8/3 or 8/4 that made him king.

Cyrus' Departure and Darius' Appointment of Sub-governors. The Chronicle does not tell us when Cyrus left Babylon, but it is reasonable to assume that he did so shortly thereafter. In the first place, he was delayed in arriving there for two weeks, undoubtedly due to mopping up remaining pockets of Babylonian resistance. It is likely that he had more of this kind of work to do. His enemy Nabonidus was still on the loose, for the Chronicle indicates that he was only captured there later when he returned to the city. Thus, Cyrus probably set out in further pursuit of Nabonidus on 8/4 or 8/5.

Shortly after Cyrus' departure, Darius took his first action in setting the kingdom in order: he appointed governors. The Chronicle attributes this action to Ugbaru, and Dan 6:1-2 attributes this action to Darius. They should, there-

¹¹ Shea, "Nabonidus Chronicle," 5-8.

¹² ANET, 306.

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fore, be identified as the same person. Daniel is more specific in terms of identifying the number of lower and upper level officials.

But the highest post under the king had not yet been filled—that of chief governor or first president. The other officials could see, however, the way the selection process was going. Darius had evidently become acquainted with Daniel during the period of his military governorship, and Dan 6:3 says he “planned” to appoint him to that post.

Fearing Daniel’s appointment was imminent, the other officials, his rivals, had to swing into action quickly. If they were appointed on 8/6, then they probably hatched the plot against Daniel that night and went to the king with it the next day, 8/7. Darius, not realizing what was coming next, acceded to the decree that no prayers could be given to any god for thirty days. The decree went into effect, let us say, on 8/7.

Daniel heard about the issuing of the decree at that time, but he determined to continue with his usual practice of praying three times a day (Dan 6:10). As has been pointed out in the previous study, it did not take thirty days to catch Daniel in prayer; it only took one day. The next day, 8/8, Daniel’s violation was reported to the king, and the king was forced to take action by the strength of his own decree. He had to put Daniel in the lions’ den.

As has been noted in the previous study,¹³ this was an auspicious time for a decree of this nature to be issued. Nabonidus had gathered most of the gods of the cities of Babylonia into the capital city in order to protect it. They had not yet been returned. That course of action did not begin until the next month, the 9th, according to the Chronicle. With most of the gods gathered locally, Darius had more control over access to them for prayers. This kind of control he would not have had available to him later, when the gods were returned to their various cities.

Daniel In and Out of the Lion’s Den. The officials antagonistic to Daniel did not have long to wait. They reported his actions to the king, probably on 8/8, and Daniel spent that night in the den with the lions, where he was protected by the angel. The king worried about Daniel and spent that sleepless night fasting (Dan 6:18). The next morning, however, Daniel emerged unscathed (vs. 19-23). By now we have reached 8/9 in the rapid procession of events.

Dan 11:1 says Gabriel “confirmed” and “strengthened” Darius the Mede. These are two separate actions. He was “confirmed” when he became king on 8/4. He was “strengthened” especially during his night of anxious waiting while Daniel was down in the lions’ den. While one angel protected Daniel, another ministered to the anxious king.

Angered by the officials who had maneuvered him into this awkward position, Darius now took action against them. Probably within an hour or two after having Daniel removed, he cast the officials and their families into the lions’

¹³ Shea, “Nabonidus Chronicle,” 5-8, 11.

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den. On this occasion the lions were not so cordial in their reception as they were to Daniel. Those officials and their families died there in Daniel's place (v. 24).

Recognizing the divine protection afforded to Daniel, Darius made a decree that all of his subjects should "tremble and fear" before the God of Daniel (vs. 25-27). It is interesting to note that the text does not say they should pray to his God on this occasion.

The Plot. Darius had now angered two groups of his constituents on three counts. First, he had angered his officials by favoring Daniel over them and then by executing their colleagues who were more intimately involved in the plans against Daniel.

Second, he had angered the priests of Marduk on two counts. First he had prohibited any prayers to the god whom they served, the god of the city and the country of Babylon. Then he had added insult to injury by proclaiming a decree in favor of the God of Daniel, not their own god Marduk.

The priests of Marduk were a powerful class in Babylon. They were sufficiently powerful that Nabonidus went into exile in Teima of Arabia for ten years for favoring the moon god Sin over Marduk.¹⁴ They were not a class to be trifled with, and by favoring the God of Daniel over their god, Darius put himself in the path of danger that Nabonidus had avoided by voluntary exile.

The priests of Marduk, perhaps joined by disaffected officials, hatched a plot against Darius. They determined to poison him. This has been suggested in a previous study,¹⁵ but now the specific occasion is suggested. The plot against Darius had been hatched by 8/10, and they put it into effect on 8/11.

The Occasion of the Assassination: The Evening Sacrifice. While the priests of Marduk were plotting against the king, Daniel was praying to his God for the return of his people and the restoration of their land, city, and temple (Dan 9:1-20). The answer to his prayer came, and it was presented to him by Gabriel (vs. 21-23). He told Daniel that the people would go back and restore their city and temple. He also gave a longer view of the future of Daniel's people (vs. 24-27). This answer came when Gabriel appeared to Daniel at the "time of the evening sacrifice" (Dan 9:21).

It is commonly assumed by the commentaries that this refers to the time of sacrifice in Jerusalem,¹⁶ but that does not necessarily follow. The people had not yet returned (Ezra 1-2), the temple had not yet been rebuilt (Ezra 5-6), and the altar there had not yet been reconstructed for sacrifice (Ezra 3). Thus, no sac-

¹⁴ For Nabonidus' ten year sojourn in Teima see now Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556-639 B.C.*, Yale Near Eastern Researches, vol. 10 (New Haven: Yale U, 1989), 149-202.

¹⁵ Shea, "Nabonidus Chronicle," 12-13.

¹⁶ For two representative examples see J. A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel*, International Critical Commentary, reprint ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1979), 371; L. F. Hartman and A. A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), 23:243.

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rifices were being offered in Jerusalem, and even if they had been, it is not certain that Daniel would have known their exact timing.

The sacrifices that he did know about were those that took place in Babylon. In no way endorsing their validity, Daniel could still use them as an ordinary marker for time. It probably was then, the time of the evening sacrifice in Babylon, that Gabriel's answer to Daniel's prayer came to him.

Saggs describes the animal sacrifices in Babylonian temples as taking place twice a day in pairs of offerings: "the gods enjoyed regular meals, two or—in some places in the late period—four a day, a 'great' and a 'little' meal, morning and evening, placed on tables before the divine images."¹⁷

The animals sacrificed in these meals included sheep, oxen, calves, and lambs. A variety of other foods were also offered to the gods to go along with the meat entree. What was done with these animal sacrifices? "The meal was technically a banquet to which other deities were invited, and at which the human worshipers and even the dead might be present. The gods themselves received specified parts of the animals, both in the daily offerings and special sacrifices, the remainder going to the *king*, the priests, and the temple staff [*italics mine*]."¹⁸

This then presented an opportunity for the priests of Marduk to get their revenge. When the king was presented with his portion of the "evening sacrifice" referred to by Daniel, there was an added ingredient in it—poison. The priests and the temple staff obviously avoided the contaminated portion.

The result: the king died that night, 8/11. This is recorded by the Nabonidus Chronicle both with regard to the date and the time on that date, at night. This is a rare, indeed virtually unique reference to the time of a king's death. The poison ingested with his portion of the evening sacrifice did its work, and he died that night. A general aged 62, in previously good health, strong enough to lead a conquering army three weeks earlier and to welcome Cyrus but a week before, dies suddenly after ingesting his portion of the evening sacrifice; a very suspicious circumstance. If we had his body to assay, it probably would show that it was well laced with one kind of poison or another.

It may at first appear paradoxical that a king who prohibited prayers to the gods should then partake of a sacrifice offered to them. In spite of the prohibition against prayers, the sacrifices undoubtedly continued. These two liturgical functions served different purposes. Prayers served the purpose of gaining an answer to those petitions for the benefit of the person offering them. Sacrifices, on the other hand, were for the benefit of the gods. The gods were hungry, and they had to be fed. If they were not fed, they could turn upon the population and the country and cause all kinds of havoc. One did well, therefore, to continue sacrifices, even if prayers were suspended.

¹⁷ H.W.F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (New York: Hawthorn, 1962), 371.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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If this had been a normal meal in the palace that had been poisoned, then Darius' cupbearer might have borne the brunt of the assault, unless he was in on the plot. But this was no ordinary meal; this one came directly from the gods, and it may have been eaten on the spot. Surely there could not be anything wrong with it, could there? Wrong. The special nature of the occasion provided the priests with an opportunity that would not otherwise have been offered to them, and it appears that they took it. Ugbaru/Darius the Mede died in the night on 8/11, probably after ingesting poison that came to him with the evening sacrifice. This probably was the same evening sacrifice to which Daniel referred.

Aftermath

The reason for the prophecy. It may seem strange that the prophecy of Dan 9:24-27 was given to Daniel at the very time that the king was being served his fatal portion of the sacrifice, but there may also have been a specific reason for it. Theoretically, Daniel could have prayed this prayer, dated in the 1st year of Darius the Mede, anytime during the week between 8/4 and 8/11.

We know he did not pray it during the night that he was down in the lion's den, for it is very unlikely that he took the scroll of Jeremiah down there with him. Earlier in the week there was turmoil connected with the new appointment of the governors. Now all of that and its distasteful conclusion appeared to be behind Daniel. Now he could really turn his attention to praying about the fate of his people. Thus, while there are other possibilities during this week, his prayers in the afternoon of 8/11 appear to be the most appropriate time during that week for him to have prayed for them.

Why was the prophecy given in answer to that prayer? Things looked favorable for the exiled Jews. Darius the Mede appeared to be kindly disposed toward Daniel and thus, through him, possibly to his people. But the next morning Daniel woke to find the king had died during the night. Would all of his optimism for the return of his people be dashed by this evil turn of events? No. Gabriel had already assured him the night before that Jeremiah's prophecy of the return would occur, in spite of what happened among earthly rulers. Looked at from this perspective, there would have been no more appropriate time for Gabriel to have brought this assurance. Daniel was already fortified for the events of the morrow.

Daniel's dating. One thing he could not do thereafter was, however, to date any more of his prophecies to the First Year of Darius the Mede. The king was dead, and that date formula went out of circulation after this brief use. It was no longer appropriate from 8/12 in 539 B.C. onward.

The Babylonian Gods. One thing from Darius the Mede did live on after his death besides Daniel's knowledge and memory of him. That was his thirty-day decree. This was a law of the Medes and Persians that did not change, even if the king who gave it had died. It is interesting to see in this connection that the Chronicle notes that the gods did not begin to return to their cities until the

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9th month. The Chronicle does not specify upon which day this process began, but if one were to speculate on the basis of the chronology elucidated above, it would have been 9/6, 30 days after the date that Darius' decree probably was originally given.

Summary

The events described above may be tabulated as follows:

- 7/16 Ugbaru/Darius "received" the kingdom of Babylon by conquest (Dan 5:31). He established peace there as military governor (Chronicle, col. III, line 15).
- 8/3 Cyrus arrived in Babylon, greeted by crowds (Chronicle, col. III, line 18b-19).
- 8/4 Ugbaru/Darius "was made king," by Cyrus (Dan 9:1).
Ugbaru/Darius "confirmed" by Gabriel (Dan 11:1a).
- 8/5 Cyrus left Babylon in pursuit of Nabonidus.
- 8/6 Ugbaru appointed governors (Chronicle, col. III, line 20).
Darius appointed governors (Dan 6:1-2).
Darius planned to make Daniel chief governor (Dan 6:3).
- 8/7 Seeing Daniel's appointment coming, the other governors plotted against him (Dan 6:4-5).
Darius issued his decree against prayer (Dan 6:6-9).
- 8/8 Daniel, caught in prayer, was reported to Darius and placed in lions' den (Dan 6:10-17).
Darius was "strengthened" by Gabriel that night (Dan 11:1b).
- 8/9 Daniel was delivered in the morning (Dan 6:19-23).
The plotting officials were killed in lions' den (Dan 6:24).
Darius' decree on behalf of the God of Daniel was given (Dan 6:25-27).
- 8/10 Plot against Darius by priests and surviving officials.
- 8/11 At the evening sacrifice Daniel prayed and Gabriel answered (Dan 9:1-27).
The plot against Darius was carried out with a poisoned sacrifice.
Ugbaru/Darius died that night (Chronicle, col. III, line 22b).
- 9/6 Thirty days of Darius' decree ended (Dan 6:7).
Gods began to return to their cities (Chronicle, col. III, line 21-22c).

Conclusion

H. H. Rowley once wrote that there is no room in history for Darius the Mede.¹⁹ Actually there is room in history for Darius the Mede as king of Baby-

¹⁹Rowley, "*Darius the Mede and the Four World Kingdoms* (Cardiff: U of Wales, 1935), 53.

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lon, but in progressive studies the size of that room has been reduced from a year and a month, to a month, to a week. That appears to be an irreducible minimum.

When that irreducible minimum is reached, however, it leads to a tight and detailed integration of what is known of these events from Daniel and the Nabonidus Chronicle. The scenario is tight, but neither too tight nor too loose. It makes just the right fit. Once this detailed chronology is adopted, these events can be seen in an explanatory sequence.

Cyrus appointed Darius. Darius appointed governors. Darius intended to appoint Daniel. In plotting against Daniel, the governors unwittingly cast the die for their own death and that of Darius because they used a religious vehicle against Daniel. This trap not only caught Daniel, but it also offended the priests of Marduk. Darius' decree in favor of the God of Daniel only inflamed their anger further. This led to their plot against Darius, which they carried out with a poisoned sacrifice offered to the king. He died that night as a result. In the meantime, Gabriel brought Daniel assurance that even though this earthly ruler might pass off the scene of action, God's plans and purposes for His people would still go forward to completion. And so they did.

In the early days of American television there was a show entitled "Queen for a Day." In it the woman selected as a queen received many gifts and had a variety of privileges, but only for one day. If Darius the Mede had been a participant on that show, he would not have been queen for a day, he would have been king for a week—but what an action-packed week it was! Unfortunately for Darius, that week ended with his death. It is for the reason of the narrow range of this time frame that historians have not found other evidence for his kingship besides the Nabonidus Chronicle and the book of Daniel.

After Darius' death Cyrus left the local throne of Babylon unoccupied, for his tablets there continue to date to him only as "King of Lands." At the end of his accession period Cambyses was installed upon that throne. For one year the tablets written there were dated to "Year One, Cambyses King of Babylon, Cyrus King of Lands" or just "Year One Cambyses King of Babylon." After that year, Cyrus discharged Cambyses from that post, for reasons still unknown to us.

The vassal kingship of Babylon was short lived. Darius lasted there only a week, and Cambyses kept it for only a year. After that it was absorbed into the kingship of the Persian Empire. The end stage of this development was reflected in the combined titulary on the tablets written there, "King of Babylon and Lands."

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