

The identity of Belshazzar, the last king of Babylon mentioned in Daniel 5, is one of those historical cases that becomes more and more interesting the deeper you dig. The Biblical text says that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's father but historical records show that Nebuchadnezzar had several sons, none of whom were named Belshazzar. It's true that the word translated "father" can mean "ancestor" or even "predecessor" so that gives us a bit of wiggle room, but we still don't know precisely who Belshazzar is.

His identity becomes even more mysterious when we discover that Nabonidus, and not Belshazzar, was the last king of the Neo-Babylonian empire. None of the ancient historians make mention of a Belshazzar, king of Babylon. In fact, until the mid 1800's the only record that Belshazzar ever existed was from the account given in Daniel 5.

This lack of historical evidence led scholars to conclude that the author(s) of Daniel simply made the character up.

"Why would Daniel make up a king?" you might ask. Well, for most critical scholars, Daniel wasn't the actual author of the book of Daniel. Seventh-day Adventists believe that Daniel is a book of prophecy written in the mid 500's BC by an eye-witness named...Daniel. Critical scholars believe that Daniel was written in the second century BC during the time of the Maccabean revolt against a king named Antiochus Epiphanes. According to this view, Daniel was a poorly written history used as religious propaganda to galvanize the Jews in their opposition to their Selucid overlords.

When these critical scholars saw the account of Belshazzar in Daniel 5 they would just shake their heads and say that whoever wrote chapter 5 simply didn't know Babylonian history all that well and so he made up the Belshazzar character. If the author of chapter 5 had had access to the ancient histories, he would have known that the last king of Babylon was Nabonidus, not Belshazzar. Daniel 5 was just one more piece of evidence that the book wasn't prophecy or reliable history.

Of course, that view was challenged just a bit when several archaeological finds revealed that Belshazzar was an actual person. He did, in fact, exist.

In 1854 there were 4 clay cylinders excavated from Ur. Today they are called the Nabonidus Cylinders. Recorded on these cylinders is a prayer from Nabonidus to the moon god, Sin, on behalf of his son named...wait for it... Belshazzar.

In 1882 a cuneiform text called the Nabonidus Chronicles was published that told how the king had left Babylon and relocated to the city of Tema. Nabonidus spent 10 of his 17 year reign in that city (which was the religious center for the worship of his moon god). Guess who he left in charge back in Babylon? Yep, that's right, Belshazzar, the crown prince.

So it turns out that Belshazzar was the first born son of Nabonidus and that the two of them were co-regents of the empire at the time Babylon fell to the armies of Medes and Persians. This fact is now confirmed by several archaeological discoveries and accepted by all mainstream scholars.

One reason why this is significant is because it reveals that the author of Daniel 5 had knowledge of Babylonian history that was likely not available to people living in the time of the Maccabees. Any historical record of Belshazzar was, at that time, safely buried in the sand, forgotten by all. This means that it is highly unlikely that Daniel 5 was written during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. In fact, the author's knowledge of Belshazzar strongly implies that he was an eye witness of the events he recorded. Rather than religious propaganda written several hundred years after the fact, maybe, just maybe, Daniel is a book of prophecy written by none other than the prophet Daniel.

So who was Belshazzar? After Nebuchadnezzar died the kingdom passed to his son, Amel-Marduk. The Bible mentions this king by the name as Evil-Merodach (2Ki. 25:27, Jer. 52:31). Amel-Marduk reigned for 2 years before being murdered by his brother-in-law Neriglissar who was king for 4 years before he passed the throne to his son, Labashi-Marduk. This young king was murdered after about 9 months by an unrelated man named Nabonidus, who became the last king of Babylon, together with his son Belshazzar. Some scholars have concluded that Nabonidus married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters somewhere along the way, which would make Belshazzar a grandson to the great king. But this relationship isn't conclusive.

What it all boils down to is that Belshazzar was an actual historical figure. He ruled in Babylon as co-regent while his father chased favor from the moon god, Sin. The younger man was in charge of the capital when the armies of Cyrus the Great took the city with minimal loss of life. The fact that the author of Daniel knew about Belshazzar when no ancient historian mentions him is strong evidence that Daniel 5 was written by someone very close to the events it describes. Most probably by Daniel himself.

Hopefully this little historical excursion gives you a greater appreciation for the historical reliability of this ancient text.

Happy Sabbath!  
Pastor Tyler

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