

IDENTIFICATION
OF
DARIUS THE MEDE

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Cover Illustration / by Elizabeth J. Law (© Elizabeth J. Law). The scene suggests a well-known practice among Mesopotamian kings: here a Medo-Persian king is engaged in physical combat with a mature male lion in order to prove his divinely-ordained status and favor.

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Biblical Portrayal of Cyrus as “Darius the Mede”

The author of Daniel had theological reasons for his purposeful portrayal of Cyrus as “Darius the Mede.” The events and actions of each biblical passage referring to Darius the Mede suggest that he and Cyrus the Persian are one and the same person. In the book of Daniel, Darius the Mede is mentioned by the name “Darius” eight times (Dan 5:31; 6:1, 6, 9, 25, 28; 9:1; 11:1). In chapter six alone, the author of Daniel uses the word “king” thirty times to refer to Darius the Mede. Cyrus is mentioned three times (Dan 1:21; 6:28; 10:1).

(1906; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 31 (hereafter *BDB*). Also, “אֶתְשֶׁתֶּרֶן adj. (?) royal (fr. Pers. *Khshatīra*, *lordship*, *realm*)”; see *BDB*, 31. Kent notes that “Khshathrita” was the name of Phraortes, the Median who rebelled against Darius the Great and claimed to be a descendant of the Median king Cyaxares; see Kent, 180.

The Book of Daniel is literature—an ancient masterpiece. In each passage specifically referring to Darius the Mede, the author has purposefully supplied information in order to reveal to the audience his ultra identity as “Cyrus the Great.” These hints were not just for the original audience of his book, but are even more important for later generations of readers who, being ignorant of most of the historical facts, might lose track of the identity of “the Great” conqueror of the Chaldeans.

Daniel 5:30-31

In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took [קִבַּל] the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old (Dan 5:30-31).

The night of the fall of Babylon (539 BC), Belshazzar was slain and his kingdom was taken by Darius the Mede. Besides the obvious question concerning the identity of Darius the Mede, other questions arise from the information contained in this verse. In this context, the first question concerns the name Darius and its meaning. A second question concerns agency: who took (received) the kingdom and who gave the kingdom?

The first question concerns the name Darius and its meaning in this context. Joseph Wiesehofer and Azizeh Azodi report the reputable understanding that the name Darius “may be translated as ‘holding the good.’”¹⁵⁵ This name was not always a proper name, but was in most cases an appellative title, here applied by the author of Daniel to the Medo-Persian conqueror of Babylon.

In 1878 William Saint Chad Boscawen wrote an article entitled “Babylonian Dated Tablets, and the Canon of Ptolemy.”¹⁵⁶ As he worked through the Ptolemy’s list of ancient kings,¹⁵⁷ he discussed the various Aryan titles used by the Persian rulers and noted the confusion caused by these now obscure titles. In the middle of this discussion of titles, as he worked through the succession of Babylonian rulers, Boscawen came to ask the quite logical question: “Now, if Cyrus conquered Belshazzar, and took Babylon in B.C. 539, is he to be identified with Darius the Mede?”¹⁵⁸

Apparently, a normal reading of the list of kings prompted Boscawen to ask this question. He follows this question with a review of the work of Ernst von Bunsen concerning the definition of “Darius.” Von Bunsen had explained that Darius may be a title which means “firm holder” (“ruler” or “king”) and that it could be used as an alternative appellative for Artaxerxes (from *Arya* + *khshatra* = Aryan warrior/king).¹⁵⁹ Therefore, Boscawen took von

¹⁵⁵ Josef Wiesehofer and Azizeh Azodi, *Ancient Persia: From 550 BC to 650 AD* (London: I B Tauris, 2006), 30. Also see *The Encyclopedia Americana; A Library of Universal Knowledge* (New York: Encyclopedia Americana Corp, 1918), 477.

¹⁵⁶ William Saint Chad Boscawen, “Babylonian Dated Tablets, and the Canon of Ptolemy” in *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, vol. 6 (London: Office of Society of Biblical Archaeology, 1878), 1-78.

¹⁵⁷ Boscawen did not only synchronize the chronology of the Babylonian kings, but in this process he also synchronized some other Babylonian officials including a house (firm) of bankers. The successive service of three top officials of this banking house spanned 77 years during the reign of 7 kings (from Nebuchadnezzar until Darius the Great). See F. Hilton Price, “Notes on Ancient bankers and Early Goldsmiths to the Close of the Seventeenth Century,” in *Journal of the Institute of Bankers* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1880), 110.

¹⁵⁸ Boscawen, “Babylonian Dated Tablets,” 29.

¹⁵⁹ Von Bunsen, 61-62.

Bunsen's definitions and recognized a parallel between the title Artaxerxes, "the great king of the Aryans," and the meaning of Darius the Mede, "the firm holder/ruler of the Medes." Concerning the connection between these titles Boscawen states:

Admitting this use of the titles. . . we may see in the Chaldee [Aramaic] דַּרְיוֹשׁ־מֶדַּיָּא Darius the Mede, only Dariyavush Madai, the king or ruler of the Medes, a fit title for Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon, supported both by his birth and his rule. (Dan. v, 31.)

If we take this conclusion of the use of these apparently royal names in the Books of Daniel and Ezra, we shall be able to reconcile many apparently contradictory statements.¹⁶⁰

Boscawen's use of Bunsen's explanation that "Darius" was a title¹⁶¹ in order to harmonize the scriptural "*Darius the Mede*" with Ptolemy's Canon did not sit well with other scholars.¹⁶² A few years later, George Rawlinson responded to Boscawen's theory identifying "Darius the Mede" with Cyrus and called it "extraordinary," but not in a positive way.

The first argument Rawlinson posed against this theory is that, according to his thinking, it would cause Daniel 6:28 to read "So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Cyrus, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian." After a few more comments, he suggested that to continue might "insult our readers' intelligence." But he continued anyway, and presented a second argument: that Dan 5:31 and 9:1 indicate that Darius passively "received the kingdom" (from the hands of another)—meaning that since the one who received the kingdom was Darius the Mede, he could not be the same as Cyrus the Persian, because Cyrus did not passively receive the kingdom. Rawlinson drives home the point that Cyrus was a conqueror and could not be described as receiving the kingdom: "No one would say of Alexander the Great, when he conquered Darius Codomannus, that he '*was made king* over Persia.' The expression implies the reception of a kingly position by one man from the hands of another."¹⁶³

One of the great champions of the historicity of Daniel in the early part of the twentieth century was Robert Dick Wilson. Wilson continued Rawlinson's line of reasoning:

In fact, on the face of it, the author treats him [Darius] as a real king (Aramaic, *malka*) exactly in the same manner as he treats Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Cyrus, as being real kings; but with this noteworthy exception, that Darius the Mede alone is said to have received the kingdom and to have been made king.¹⁶⁴

Therefore, according to this argument, only Gubaru qualifies to be Darius the Mede because he "took" the kingdom and then was "made king" by Cyrus and reigned as his vassal. The historical fact is offered that it was Cyrus along with his generals (including Gubaru) and

¹⁶⁰ Boscawen, "Babylonian Dated Tablets," 29-30.

¹⁶¹ Concerning Darius being a title, Hormuzd Rassam, the archaeologist who discovered the Nabonidus Cylinder, reports: "The Greek historian, Syncellus, who lived in the eighth century, calls this Cyrus of Herodotus and Xenophon 'Darius Astyages,' which shows that at his time there must have been some record in existence which explained the various appellations of both Cyrus and Darius." Hormuzd Rassam, *Babylonian Cities*, London: E. Stanford, [1884], 13.

¹⁶² Thomas Tyler and others recognized the problem posed by Daniel 6:28; see Thomas Tyler, "Review" of *Babylonian Life and History* by E. A. Wallis Budge in *The Academy* (London: J. Murray, July-Dec 1884), 211.

¹⁶³ George Rawlinson, *Egypt and Babylon from Sacred and Profane Sources* (New York: J. B. Alden, 1885), 89-90.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Dick Wilson, "Darius the Mede," *Princeton Theological Review* 20 (2) (1922), 185-186.

his army who “took” the city of Babylon.¹⁶⁵ But here is the difference, the crux of Rawlinson’s and Wilson’s argument: both Cyrus and his general Gubaru can be described as “taking/receiving” (Dan 5:31) the kingdom, but only Gubaru, as a vassal king of Cyrus, can be described as being “made king” (Dan 9:1).¹⁶⁶

In opposition to this, Rowley and others argue that the phrase “took the kingdom” can be taken as an “idiom to express either normal inheritance or inheritance by sword.”¹⁶⁷ But a concept against Rowley’s argument and somewhat hard to ignore is what Rowley recognizes as a “unique expression,” specifically, the occurrence of Hoph‘al (causative-passive tense) verb *קָבַל* in Daniel 9:1; but Rowley¹⁶⁸ and Montgomery¹⁶⁹ ignored it anyway.

For some the first reading of the phrase “took the kingdom” might be misleading. The Aramaic word *קָבַל* (Pael / “D” stem) indicates that a person presents himself “before” or “in front of” another to “receive” something.¹⁷⁰ This Aramaic word occurs three times in Daniel (2:6; 5:31; 7:18). An imperfect of *קָבַל* is used in Dan. 2:6 when Nebuchadnezzar promises to the interpreters, “ye shall receive of me gifts and rewards.” In Dan 7:18 an imperfect of *קָבַל* is used to describe the future event when “the saints of the most high shall take the kingdom.” Returning to Daniel 5:31, *קָבַל* is used to describe the apparent result of the victory won by the Medo-Persian army: Darius the Mede “took” the kingdom previously belonging to the Chaldeans. This definition of the word *קָבַל* “to present oneself ‘before’ or ‘in front of’ another to ‘receive’ something” implies, even without being a passive, that another person, a giver, is involved.

But in this case, the theory that Gubaru (as Darius the Mede) passively received the kingdom, the argument that this is an implied passive, is not even necessary. The context makes it clear that Darius the Mede and the Medo-Persians received the kingdom from someone else. In human terms, Darius the Mede gained the kingdom by means of the army’s successful conquest over the Babylonians. But, the context of this passage includes a decree of God. By God’s decree, the kingdom was to be taken away from the Chaldeans and Belshazzar and to be given to the Medo-Persians, and therefore also to Darius the Mede:

¹⁶⁵ The matter of agency, it might be argued, does not really matter in the conquering of a nation. The generals and the army are agents of the king (state). The officers and soldiers comprise of the army, and they fight the battles, and if successful they take the city. But it is the king, no matter who is credited with winning the battles, who wins the real prize of the war and “takes the kingdom.”

¹⁶⁶ Rowley lists six scholars (Venema, Pusey, Keil, Wright, Wilson, and Boutflower) as holding that these phrases “received the kingdom” (5:31) and “was made king” (9:1) imply that Darius the Mede’s authority was delegated to Gubaru by Cyrus; see Rowley, 51. It would be good to add Whitcomb and Shea to this list of excellent scholars opposed by Rowley.

¹⁶⁷ Rowley, 51-52. Rowley enlists the support of Kliefoth, Bevan, Charles, Margoliouth, and others to prove that “the phrase *מִלְכוּתָא קָבַל* in vi. 1 merely states that the kingdom passed to Darius, without the slightest indication as to the manner of the transfer.” Rowley, 51-52.

¹⁶⁸ Rowley, 52-53.

¹⁶⁹ Montgomery gives permission to change the text: “The Hof. is found only here, and a pass, is most unlikely. We may point it as Hif., and so ‘reigned,’ after the Syr. use of the Afel. Misunderstanding of the alien idiom produced a Hof. in [the Massoretic text]” James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*. 1927, repr., New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959, 360(-361), n. 1.

¹⁷⁰ *BDB*, 1110. *BDB* indicates that the Hebrew form *קָבַל* is an Aramaic loan word; see *BDB*, 867.

This is the interpretation of the thing:

MENE; God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it.

TEKEL; You are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting.

PERES; Your kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

(Dan. 5:26-28)

The Aramaic word *יָהַב* (Peil, be given) in 5:28 is in this context the counterpart to the word *קָבַל* (receive) in 5:31. Therefore, in the context of Daniel 5:31, God is “giving” the kingdom of the Chaldeans to the Medo-Persians who are “receiving” it. And more specifically, in Daniel 5:31 the king of the Medo-Persians is identified as the one who took the kingdom.

In a similar manner, the saints of God will receive the kingdom after dominion is taken from the four beasts (Dan 7:18) This simultaneous action—God’s giving dominion to the people who are receiving it—is consistent with one of the main themes¹⁷¹ which is repeated throughout the book of Daniel: “The most high God has authority to rule in the kingdoms of men and gives these kingdoms to whomsoever He will” (Dan. 4:32).

This theme of God’s authority and active rule over the kingdoms of men is mentioned at least fifteen times in the book of Daniel (listed below). In fact, the first two verses of the book (Dan 1:1-2) set the stage for this theme and its variations, which are woven throughout Daniel’s narratives. The following is a list of this theme’s fifteen specific occurrences throughout the book of Daniel:

1. God gives Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar:
“Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand” (Dan 1:1-2).
2. God takes kingdoms away from one king and gives the kingdom to another king:
“He removes kings, and sets up kings” (Dan 2:21).
3. God gave a great dominion to Nebuchadnezzar:
“You, O king, are a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given you a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory” (Dan 2:37, 47).
4. God’s authority and power is greater than Nebuchadnezzar’s:
“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. . . . God. . . delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word (Dan 3:17, 28).
5. God gives kingdoms to the basest of men:
“This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever he will, and sets up over it the basest of men” (Dan 4:17).
6. God preserves the kingdom for Nebuchadnezzar during his illness:
“And whereas they commanded to leave the stump of the tree roots; your kingdom shall be sure unto you, after that you shall have known that the heavens do rule” (Dan 4:26).

¹⁷¹ This theme is a focus of the chiasmic structure (see p. 12) of the Aramaic portion of the book of Daniel.

7. God takes the kingdom away from Nebuchadnezzar:
 “There fell a voice from heaven, saying, ‘O king Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from you’” (Dan 4:31).
8. God returned the glory of the kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar:
 “I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion. . . . At the same time my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me” (Dan 4:34-36).
9. God takes away the kingdom from Belshazzar:
 “Your kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians” (Dan 5:28).
10. God’s kingdom shall not be destroyed and His dominion reaches even into the Lions’ Den:
 “He is the living God, and stedfast for ever, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end. He delivers and rescues, and he works signs and wonders in heaven and in earth, who hath delivered Daniel from the power of the lions” (Dan 6:26-27).
11. God gives dominion to the beast(s) (which represent kingdoms):
 “And dominion was given to it (the beast)” (Dan 7:1-8).
12. God gives an everlasting dominion to the Son of Man:
 “And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:14).
13. God shall give dominion and judgment to His saints:
 “But the saints of the most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever. . . . Until the Ancient of days came, and judgment was given to the saints of the most High; and the time came that the saints possessed the kingdom” (Dan 7:18, 22).
14. God shall take away the dominion of the one horn arising out of the ten:
 “But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end” (Dan 7:26).
15. God will give the dominion of all the kingdoms to His saints:
 “And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him” (Dan 7:27).

To assign the action of the “giving” of the Chaldean kingdom to a human agent instead of God would be to miss a major point of the book. There is no denial here of the involvement and the responsibility of human activities, such as Nebuchadnezzar’s army coming against the city of Jerusalem (Dan 1:1) or of Cyrus’ army coming against the city of Babylon (Dan 5:31). The book of Daniel expressly shows that human activity is used by God, sometimes in coordination with heavenly agents (Dan 6:22; 10:20-11:1), to accomplish His purposes. Still, the net result is according to what God wills: “He gives the kingdom to whomsoever He will.”

God's decree took the kingdom from Belshazzar and gave it to Darius the Mede, who actively received the kingdom.

In the introduction of Darius the Mede, there is an incidental hint, the approximate sixty-two-year-old age of Darius. The identification method employed in chapter four of this dissertation shows the value of knowing someone's age and using it as an identifying mark. The matching of the age of Cyrus the Great¹⁷² with the age of Darius the Mede was a significant qualifying characteristic which helped to identify Cyrus as Darius the Mede, but there might be another reason why the author provided this hint.

This number, which is otherwise extraneous information, is specific to three things in the book of Daniel: 1) Darius, 2) Cyrus, and 3) the prophecy of the weeks. The author might be using the approximate age of Darius, sixty-two (62), to emphasize the prophecy of the seventy weeks determined upon Israel and Jerusalem (Dan 9:24).

This prophecy of the seventy (70) weeks is divided into three segments: seven (7) weeks + sixty-two (62) weeks + one (1) week (Dan 9:25-26). Cyrus, the 62-year-old conqueror, gave the commandment granting the Jews permission to return to the land and to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. In Daniel 9:25, after a commandment is given to initiate the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple, and after the conclusion of the prophesied 62 weeks, that temple, which Cyrus commanded to rebuild, is to be destroyed. The link between the 62-year-old Darius the Mede and the 62-year-old Cyrus the Great reinforces this prophecy concerning the 62 weeks which is to pass before the new Temple will be destroyed.

Daniel 6

The description of Darius the Mede throughout the sixth chapter of Daniel contains many hints to ensure that Daniel's readers will catch his identity. One of the questions usually asked concerning Daniel's description of Darius the Mede is the following: "Why was Daniel not more explicit concerning his identity?" But there are some who would argue that Daniel could not be more explicit in his description of this supreme ruler, other than just to come out and state his name—which in fact, he did in the final verse of this chapter. Still, this does not fully answer why Daniel was not immediately explicit. But first, the specific details of Daniel's description of King Darius in Daniel 6 should be reviewed.

¹⁷² Muhammad Dandamaev provides a summary of Cyrus' birth, reign, and death: "Cicero (*De Divinatione* 1.23.46), following the Greek historian Dinon, reported that Cyrus became king when he was forty years old and then ruled for thirty years. As Cyrus died in 530 b.c.e., he must have been born around 600 b.c.e. and must have succeeded his father as king of Persia in 559 b.c.e. (cf. Stronach, p. 286)"; see Dandamaev, "Cyrus II." (Encyclopaedia Iranica, iranica.com, 2009) available on the internet at <http://www.iranica.com/newsite/articles/unicode/v6f5/v6f5a026.html>. Kuhrt reports that the only other chronologically fixed data for Cyrus (aside from his death) are contained in the Babylonian Chronicle.... It records Cyrus' defeat of the Median ruler, Astyages, in 550, and Cyrus' conquest of Babylonia in 539"; see Kuhrt, 48. Herodotus, Ctesias, and Dinon all agree that Cyrus died having reigned approximately thirty years. Dinon is the only source to report Cyrus' age at death: "nam ad septuagesimum pervenit, cum quadraginta natus annos regnare coepisset"; (trans. "for he lived to his seventieth year, having begun to reign at forty"). (Dinon quoted by Cicero in *De Divinatione* I.xxiii (46)). The Latin text is available in *De Divinatione* by Cicero published in the Loeb's Classical Library, 1923. The English translation is available on the internet at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cicero/de_Divinatione/1*.html.