

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON: BELSHAZZAR'S RELATIONSHIP TO KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR

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The historical identification of the person by the name of Belshazzar, who in Dan 5 is said to have been the last king of Babylon, has been one of the most debated issues in the book of Daniel. Today, however, there are several ancient texts which unequivocally support the biblical statements on the person of Belshazzar and they even clarify the role which this ruler played in the Neo-Babylonian empire prior to its fall.¹ Many more questions, however, remain regarding Belshazzar's person and office. One such question is Belshazzar's relationship to king Nebuchadnezzar.

The glorious king Nebuchadnezzar II is remembered as the builder of Neo-Babylon, and the readers of the Bible know him as a "king of kings"² who ruled in the time of the prophet Daniel. Belshazzar, on the other hand, is notorious for his act of bringing that brilliant empire to an end. It is known from the official history of Neo-Babylon that between these two kings, no less than four other kings were sitting on Babylon's throne, namely, Amel-Marduk, Nerigissar, Labashi-Marduk, and Nabonidus.³ For some reason, not too well known today, the writer of the book of Daniel described Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's "father," and Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's "son."⁴

There are several ways in which the students of Daniel have understood the meaning of the words "father" and "son" in Dan 5. This article will first present

¹L. F. Hartman and A. A. Di Lella consider this detail as genuinely historical: "Apart from several minor details in the story that are in keeping with customs of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, the chief item of historical truth in the story is the fact that it makes a genuine historical personage, Belshazzar, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty." L. F. Hartman and A. A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*, Anchor Bible, vol. 23 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 185.

²The superlative construction "the king of kings" is applied to Nebuchadnezzar in Dan 2:36 and should be viewed in the context of an emperor who rules over other kings who are his subjects. The expression could also be translated as "the most excellent king." Elsewhere in the Bible this title is strictly reserved for God. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version.

³Amel-Marduk, who is also known as Evil-Merodach from 2 Kgs 25:27-30, was king Nebuchadnezzar's son.

⁴Six times in the chapter Nebuchadnezzar is called Belshazzar's father: in v. 2 ("his father"), in v. 11 thrice ("your father" twice, "your father, the king"), in v. 13 ("the king, my father"), and in v. 18 ("your father"); once Belshazzar is called Nebuchadnezzar's "son" in v. 22 ("But you his son, O Belshazzar").

these views and then add one more piece of evidence pertinent to this discussion which is virtually absent from scholarly debates on Belshazzar. We begin with the literal view which is found in some scholarly works, and follow with the non-literal views.

The Literal Meaning of "Father" and "Son"

A good number of studies, both scholarly and popular, are still today based on the assumption that the book of Daniel is legendary in nature.¹ Such studies consider the use of the terms "father" and "son" in Dan 5 as one more illustration of how the assumption on the non-historical character of Daniel is valid. One good example is the statement made by a leading authority on Danielic studies in his recent magnum opus:

Yet the Belshazzar of Daniel still presents historical problems. First he was son not of Nebuchadnezzar but of Nabonidus, and though "son" might stand for "grandson" or even "descendant, Nabonidus was not descended from Nebuchadnezzar at all.²

Another, more practical commentary on Daniel makes a similar statement:

All of this seems precise and history-like, but it proves to be the stuff of brilliant, colorful storytelling more than the date of actual history for the simple reason that Nebuchadnezzar had no son named Belshazzar and his actual successor to the throne was Amel-marduk, the Evil-merodach of II Kings 25:27. Nor was Babylon captured and its king slain by anyone named "Darius the Mede."³

This line of reasoning has led the first author to spell out his general assumption on the book of Daniel in the following way:

According to the consensus of modern critical scholarship, the stories about Daniel and his friends are legendary in character, and the hero himself most probably never existed.⁴

In spite of the absence of solid factual evidence that Belshazzar was truly related to Nebuchadnezzar, some scholars still argue for a possibility that Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's (grand)son in the literal sense. Professor D. J. Wiseman, a foremost defender of the historicity of Daniel, proposes the following thesis:

It may well be that Belshazzar . . . was a (grand)son of Nebuchadnezzar. Nothing is yet known of Nabonidus' wife, so that it is not impossible that she was another

¹For W. S. Towner, for example, "Daniel is a non-historical personage modeled by the author(s) of the book after the ancient worthy who is linked in Ezekiel 14:14,20 with righteous Noah and righteous Job, and who is described (Ezek 28:3) as a wise man." W. S. Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 5.

²J. J. Collins, *A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, Hermeneia, vol. 27 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 32.

³Towner, 70.

⁴Collins, 1.

daughter of Nebuchadrezzar who married Nabonidus who was already of high rank (*lu. lugal*) in Nebuchadrezzar's eighth year.¹

Alan Millard had already proposed that Nabonidus might have married one of Nebuchadrezzar's daughters just like Neriglissar had, and Millard concluded that the words addressed to Belshazzar, "king Nebuchadrezzar, your father" (or grandfather), may express the literal truth.² "This view," says D. J. A. Clines, "is uncertain, however."³

It is fair to say that up to the present there is no extra-biblical evidence that would directly support the literal meaning of the terms "father" or "son" in Dan 5. This does not mean that Belshazzar could not have been Nebuchadrezzar's (grand)son at all, but rather that the historical evidence for the thesis is lacking. Arguments from silence prove nothing. P. R. Davies says, "The literal meaning of 'son' should not be pressed; . . . a strong case against Daniel's historical reliability is not enhanced by the inclusion of weak arguments such as this."⁴ For the same reason however, it is unwise to pronounce Daniel's statements as legendary or fictional and dismiss their historical validity.⁵

Non-Literal Meanings of "Father" and "Son"

A good number of scholars take a moderate⁶ approach to the text and message of Daniel, and in this particular case they view the terms "father" and "son" in Dan 5 as figurative or non-literal. The first reason for this is of a linguistic-cultural nature, since the Aramaic word *'ab* means not always "father" but sometimes "grandfather" or a remote ancestor. A good biblical example is found in Gen 28:13, where Abraham is said to have been Jacob's "father" (Hebrew *'b*) when in fact he was his "grandfather." Says Gerhard Hasel, among others,

The fact of the situation is, of course, that the word "father" in Semitic languages, including Hebrew, also can stand for grandfather, a more remote physical ancestor, or even for a predecessor in office.⁷

From another point of view, which may be termed historical-sociological, the same word *'ab* can mean "a predecessor in office," as attested in both biblical and extrabiblical texts. The best known example from the Bible is Elisha's cry to

¹D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon*, Schweich Lectures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 11.

²A. R. Millard, "Daniel 1-6 and History," *Evangelical Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1977): 71-72.

³D. J. A. Clines, "Belshazzar," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, fully rev. and reset ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:455.

⁴P. R. Davies, *Daniel*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 31.

⁵Some scholars are forced to admit that there are elements in Dan 5 which are "historically true," but then in their next sentence they are quick to return to their skepticism when they say: "But beyond that, the story told in ch. 5 is mostly legend and fiction." Hartman and Di Lella, 186.

⁶By "moderate" is meant neither a literalistic nor a skeptical approach to Daniel or to the Bible in general.

⁷Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies (AUSS)* 19 (1981): 44.

Elijah, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (2 Kgs 2:12). The case of Jehu is the best known extrabiblical example:

Moreover, the ancient Semitic languages termed any predecessor in office as the "father" of his immediate or mediate successor. Thus it was with Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat, the son of Nimshi, who assassinated Omri's grandson Joram and then exterminated the entire family of Omri, the father of Ahab. Yet the Black Obelisk inscription of Shalmaneser III refers to Jehu as *m r Humri* ("son of Omri").¹

Still another possibility may be to view the frequent usage of the words "father" and "son" in Dan 5 as a case of the literary figure called irony. The story of Belshazzar's feast is told in rich literary style and this serves as contextual support to argue that some individual terms here could also have a rich literary flavor. In that case, Belshazzar's boastful attitude and language would be matched by the words of the queen mother² and Daniel,³ neither of whom attended the fateful banquet.⁴ Joyce Baldwin remarks in passing:

Nevertheless the constant repetition of the father-son theme in Daniel 5 appears to imply more, as though the legitimacy of the king might have been under attack.⁵

Finally, conditioned by certain religious-ethical views, some scholars rightly notice that the terms "father" and "son" can sometimes express in the Bible the character relationship between two persons. C. Mervyn Maxwell explains:

In Bible times the words "father" and "son" were often used to denote *character* relationship even where no genealogical relationship existed. For example, Paul referred to Abraham as "the *father*" of everyone who believes in Jesus. Romans 4:16. Jesus said to men who were filled with a devilish spirit, "You are of your *father* the devil." John 8:44. Conversely, troublemakers were often called "*sons of Belial*," a phrase in which "Belial" was a personification of wickedness. The idiom was common. First Samuel 2:12, K.J.V., for instance, says that "the sons of Eli [their actual father] were sons of Belial [their character father]." It is possible that Belshazzar was called a "son" of Nebuchadnezzar because both men were characterized by extraordinary pride.⁶

¹Gleason L. Archer, "Daniel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976-92), 7:16.

²Scholars are unanimous in their opinion that this person was the queen mother, rather than the queen herself. See, e.g., W. H. Shea, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel: An Update," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 137.

³Upon his arrival in the banqueting hall, Daniel does not greet Belshazzar in the customary way: "O King! Live forever!"

⁴Many commentators think that neither the queenmother, nor Daniel were invited to attend Belshazzar's feast.

⁵Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale OT Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 23.

⁶C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, vol. 1, *The Message of Daniel for You and Your Family* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1981), 86. For a list of contrasts between the two kings, see my "Thematic Links Between the Historical and Prophetic Sections of Daniel," *AUSS* 27 (1989): 121-27.

In summary, one can say that non-literal or figurative understandings of “father” and “son” in Dan 5 are well supported by evidence from the Bible and outside of it.

An Additional Piece of Evidence

Scholars are correct when they state that Belshazzar’s father Nabonidus was not a legitimate heir to the Babylonian throne.¹ In fact, both Nabonidus and his mediate predecessor Neriglissar were usurpers of the throne. It is a known fact that usurpers, popularly known as “nobody’s son(s),”² longed to be recognized as those who legitimately continued the lines of the founders of their empires or of their most famous dynasties.³ This is very true of Nabonidus, and is likely also in the case of his son Belshazzar.

Some documents from the reign of Nabonidus reveal this king’s strong propaganda machinery aimed to convince the subjects in Babylon that he was the legitimate successor of king Nebuchadnezzar. Of these, the most important for our study here is the Istanbul Stela, where in part five one can read the following words credited to Nabonidus: “I am the real executor of the wills of Nebuchadnezzar and Neriglissar, *my royal predecessors!*”⁴ These words clearly show that Belshazzar’s father liked to relate his reign to the glorious founder of Neo-Babylon, king Nebuchadnezzar. This piece of evidence is very valuable because it sheds additional light on the background to the words “father” and “son” in Dan 5.

It seems best to consider that Belshazzar’s relationship to king Nebuchadnezzar was not necessarily genealogical, and that the meaning of “father” and “son” in Dan 5 may easily be understood as figurative or non-literal. This, however, should not detract from the historicity of the events and persons described in the book.

¹Hartman and Di Lella, 186.

²The best example is a reference to Hazael who murdered his lord Ben-Hadad and seized the throne in Damascus (2 Kgs 8:7-15). The Assyrian royal annals of Shalmaneser III call him “son of a nobody,” which is to say “one without royal parentage.”

³Hazael of Damascus named his son Ben-Hadad after his lord from whom he seized the throne (2 Kgs 13:24-25).

⁴H. J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 309. Emphasis supplied. The original Akkadian text does not have the word “fathers” here, but another expression which reads “kings going before me,” i.e., “my royal predecessors.” I thank Roy Gane of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, for graciously sending me a copy of the Akkadian text.