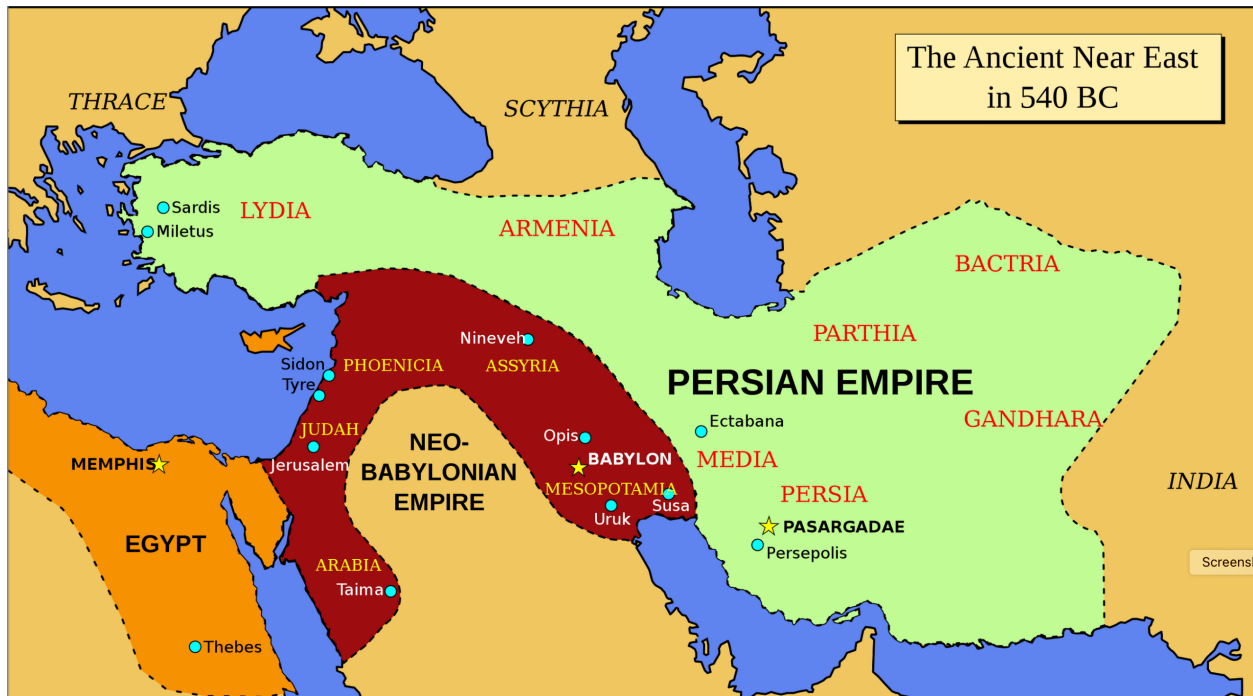


Darius the Mede by Earle Craig

Recently a friend asked the question about Nabonidus, “Is he, not Gubaru, Darius the Mede (first mentioned in Daniel 5:31)?” I will take a stab at answering it. Over the last few years I have been looking more closely at the book of Daniel, and I did so again in October and November in the light of the recent events in Israel and the Middle East. I had not considered the possibility that Darius the Mede was Nabonidus. So I dove a little more deeply into some of the available sources that refer to the historical material of Babylon, Persia, and the Medes. And I hope that I am a little closer to identifying this particular Darius.

My conclusion is that Nabonidus was not Darius the Mede. Instead, Nabonidus had a Babylonian father and an Assyrian mother, while there is one reason I can think of for why he would be called a Mede if he really was Darius. But it is a long shot. On the other hand, Darius was either a Mede or a Persian, and, if the latter, there is a good reason for calling him a Mede that is along the same lines as calling Nabonidus a Mede.

One of the problems in researching these individuals is that there is no mention of “Darius the Mede” outside the texts in the book of Daniel. Plus, the information from Ancient Near Eastern sources, which include the Nabonidus Chronicle from Babylon (about 500 B.C.) and the writings of the Greek historians Herodotus (about 450 B.C.) and Xenophon (about 400 B.C.), regarding Nabonidus and the end of his life is sparse. But before we get into the story, we should orient ourselves geographically with the map below.



The map shows the Ancient Near East in 540 B.C., the year before Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered the city of Babylon and the Babylonian Empire. The Persian Empire in light green extends from modern-day Turkey in the west to the border of India in southern Pakistan in the east. Cyrus had conquered the Median Empire in 550 B.C. and moved his capital from Pasargadae to the Median capital of Ectabana. The red area is the Babylonian Empire with Opis, the city where the first battle between Cyrus and the Babylonians (including Nabonidus?) took place on the Tigris River, and then its capital Babylon fifty miles south on the Euphrates River where Belshazzar was killed in 539 B.C. as recorded in Daniel 5. We should also notice Taima (Teyma, Teima, Tema (as found in Isaiah 21:14 and Jeremiah 25:23)) in Arabia that is important to the story of Nabonidus. And we cannot overlook Jerusalem in Judah, “the navel of the

earth” according to Ezekiel 38:12. With this map in mind, I think the story surrounding Nabonidus and Darius the Mede goes something like this.

In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar became king of the Babylonian Empire after his father Nabopolassar and ruled until 563 B.C. It was also in 605 B.C. that Nebuchadnezzar defeated a combined Assyrian and Egyptian army at the important Battle of Carchemish northwest of the city of Babylon. This city was in the southern part of what is now Iraq on the Euphrates River and about 50 miles south of modern-day Baghdad, which is on the Tigris River. Victory at the Battle of Carchemish allowed Nebuchadnezzar to secure the entire Mesopotamian Valley for himself, thus adding the former Assyrian Empire and its capital Nineveh in northern Iraq to his expanding rule.

Also, by defeating the Egyptians, Nebuchadnezzar gained access to the land of Israel, whose southern Kingdom of Judah had been partially controlled by Egypt. The northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and these Jews were exiled to the far reaches of the Assyrian Empire. Nebuchadnezzar made three incursions into the land of Israel. The first in 605 B.C., the second in 597 B.C., and the third in 587 B.C. It was as a result of his victory over Jerusalem in 605 B.C. that he deported Daniel and his three friends, along with many other Jews, to Babylon. These four became court officials as mentioned in chapter 1 of the book of Daniel.

Daniel himself was born probably around 620 B.C., making him 15 years old when he moved to Babylon. The last verse of chapter 1 says, “Thus, Daniel continued (literally “was” or “existed”) until the first year of Cyrus the king.” I think this means that Daniel remained in his role as advisor to the kings of Babylon until Cyrus of Persia took over. The exact time of Cyrus’ “first year” may be when he conquered the city in 539 B.C. or when he went through a coronation ceremony in Babylon two years later and officially became king of the newly acquired Babylonian Empire. I am inclined to think that it is the latter on the basis of the other data we will encounter. Plus, another way to state my friend’s question is, “Who was the immediate ruler of Babylon after Cyrus’ successful invasion of its empire, and, therefore, who was Darius the Mede?”

In order to answer this question, we should consider the succession of kings starting with Nebuchadnezzar—

Nebuchadnezzar	605-563 B.C.
Evil-Merodach (Man of Marduk), Nebuchadnezzar’s son	563-561 B.C.
General Neriglissar (Evil-Merodach’s brother-in-law)	561-556 B.C.
Labashi-Marduk, Neriglissar’s son	556 B.C.
Nabonidus, leader of revolt against Labashi-Marduk	556-539 B.C.
Belshazzar, son of Nabonidus	549-539 B.C.

The progression of these kings reads like a Hollywood script. When Nebuchadnezzar died in 563 B.C., his son Evil-Merodach took the throne. Two years later, his brother-in-law, General Neriglissar, who was at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C., assassinated him and became king. Neriglissar lived only another four years, and his son, Labashi-Marduk, succeeded him. Nabonidus subsequently led a revolt against the king and assassinated him nine months later in 556 B.C. He then became king of Babylon and ruled with his son, Belshazzar, until the fall of Babylon to the Persians in 539 B.C.

For our purposes, we should realize first that Nabonidus’ father was probably Babylonian while his mother was Assyrian. Could he, therefore, be considered a “Mede” and given the title “Darius”? We will wait to answer this question, but stranger things have happened in the Ancient Near East (and other parts of human history). Nevertheless, we should also notice that there is an eleven-year overlap, 549-539 B.C., of Nabonidus’ rule of Babylon and that of his son, Belshazzar, whose wild party is described in chapter 5 of Daniel. Why the overlap? This, again, is where the data is sparse, but one thing is certain. Nabonidus became very interested in expanding the Babylonian Empire west and south into Arabia, our Saudi Arabia, so that he settled in the lush and prosperous oasis of Taima, which is about 150 miles north of modern-day Medina. He may have chosen to reside there also for health reasons since he could have been in poor health and the milder, drier climate suited him.

But while the Babylonian king was far away in the desert growing dates, who was minding the store back in the capital city of Babylon? Indeed, it was his son Belshazzar, to whom he gave the responsibility of governing as much of the empire as he could from this central location. Consequently, there is an eleven-year overlap of 549-539 B.C. while Nabonidus was in Taima. Now the question is, "What happened that brought the end of the co-reigns of Nabonidus and Belshazzar in 539 B.C.?"

To answer this question, we have to go back twenty years to 559 B.C. and consider both the Median Empire in the northern part of our Iran contiguous to the southwestern shores of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Empire in the southern part of Iran bordering the eastern shores of the Persian Gulf. Plus, both these empires were situated east of the Zagros Mountains separating the Babylonians to the west and what is now Iran to the east. Cyrus the Great ascended the throne of Persia in 559 B.C. and, initially, was a vassal of the Median king, Astyages, who was also his uncle (although one source says that he was his father-in-law, too). However, a few years later, Cyrus revolted against Astyages, who sent his general, Harpagus, with his army south to put a stop to Cyrus' arrogant move.

In another irony of history, instead of Harpagus' carrying out the orders of his Median king, he turned against him and joined forces with Cyrus. Together they attacked the Median capital Ecbatana to the northwest and killed Astyages. This then in 550 B.C. made Cyrus emperor of both the Persian Empire in the south and the Median Empire in the north, the now combined Medo-Persian Empire. Cyrus also moved his capital from Pasargadae in the south to Ecbatana. With all of both Persia and Media now under his control, Cyrus turned his attention in 539 B.C. to the west and marched on Babylon, first defeating the Babylonian forces at Opis near modern-day Baghdad on the Tigris River and then continuing to their capital to the south. Nabonidus may have been at this battle and fled Opis to Babylon after his defeat.

It was then Cyrus' general, Ugbaru, who successfully diverted the Euphrates River to a previously existing channel in order to reduce the level of the water flowing under the river-gates of Babylon. The Persian army waded into the city at night under the gates, surprising the Babylonians, and taking over the city in October of 539 B.C. This probably was the same night as both Belshazzar's party and his own death as recorded in Daniel 5. Apparently, Cyrus left Babylon very soon after, which left open the responsibility of consolidating his authority over the newly conquered Babylonian Empire for two years until he returned and went through an official ceremony to make himself king of the Babylonian Empire. The result was that "Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two" (Daniel 5:31), who governed in Babylon, the sources think, for a total of fourteen years and past Cyrus' death in 529 B.C.

No one has found reference to a "Darius the Mede" outside the biblical statements in the book of Daniel. And we all want to know, who was this man? There are at least five plausible answers—

- 1) Nabonidus, the former king of Babylon
- 2) Cyrus himself
- 3) Harpagus, the former Median general
- 4) Ugbaru, Cyrus' general at the battle of Babylon
- 5) Gubaru, a second general of Cyrus' army at Babylon

Consider the first option of Nabonidus, who in Daniel 5:31 is now being described as from Media and given the title Darius. Why might this make sense? My guess is that, since Cyrus is leaving quickly and needs a governor (Persian "satrap") for this new addition and expansion of his empire, he appoints someone who is already very familiar to the people and whom they are most likely to follow. The best candidate who satisfies these requirements is Nabonidus, and Cyrus allows the *former* king to keep exercising his authority over the Babylonian people on his behalf. Plus, both the title "Darius" is Persian for "The Royal One," and Cyrus, ten years before, had conquered the Median Empire and moved his capital to its capital, Ecbatana. Hence, with this title "Darius the Mede," Cyrus makes it clear to everyone, including Nabonidus, that they are now a conquered people like the Medes and it is the Medes and the Persians who now rule over them. This would be similar to the Roman Senate's appointing Herod the Great as ruler of Jerusalem and Israel and granting him the title "king." But Herod never rebelled against

Rome. Therefore, even though Darius, “The Royal One,” was an honorific title like “king” given to Herod, it does not seem likely that Cyrus would establish the former, primary leader of a hostile and opposing people as his vice-regent.

In addition, Cyrus’ being able to appoint Nabonidus obviously depends upon the latter’s life after his sojourn in the oasis of Taima in Arabia, and the information is not altogether clear. Certainly, Nabonidus may have left Arabia some time before 539 B.C. and returned to Babylon when he heard that Cyrus had defeated the Median Empire in 550 B.C. and was setting his sights on the Babylonian Empire. And he may have fought against Cyrus at Opis and then fled to Babylon and the city’s strong defenses. Then, if he was there when the Persians breached the walls by walking under the river-gates, he might have died at the same time as his son, Belshazzar, although the ancient records regarding Nabonidus are not clear. Nevertheless, I think that further information helps point to someone else other than Nabonidus as Darius the Mede.

The second option, that Cyrus declared himself Darius the Mede makes sense if, for some reason, Cyrus wanted his newly conquered subjects in Babylonia to know him and address him with an additional Median label. He could have called himself simply Darius, which, as I said, means “The Royal One.” But then why add Mede when he was Persian? His uncle, Astyages, the king of the Median Empire, whom he had overthrown ten years earlier was most likely a Mede. Plus, Cyrus has moved his capital to that of the Medes, Ecbatana. Did the label “Mede” carry more weight than “Persian” for the Ancient Near Eastern people, so that this was important to Cyrus? Perhaps, and therefore he decides to call himself Darius the Mede, i.e., The Royal One the Mede. But even though these are good reasons to think that the second option is correct, we will see that there are other aspects of this whole story that point to someone else besides Cyrus’ being Darius the Mede.

The third option makes a lot of sense, that Cyrus appointed the former Median general Harpagus the ruler of Babylon as a reward for previously joining him in 550 B.C. in defeating his uncle, Astyages, in the Median capital of Ecbatana. This assumes that, eleven years later in 539 B.C., Harpagus accompanied Cyrus on his successful Babylonian campaign and helped Ugbaru take the capital city of Babylon. And we might think that the ancient records would mention the ongoing military career of such an important Median now turned Persian army officer, who helps overtake Babylon. But they do not, which itself, because it is an argument from silence, is not a good reason to reject the conclusion that Harpagus became Darius the Mede. Nevertheless, one source reports that Cyrus treated Harpagus well after the Ecbatana campaign in 550 B.C. and appointed him governor of Hyrcania, in the eastern part of the empire and on the southeast shores of the Caspian Sea. Assuming Harpagus is in Hyrcania in 539 B.C., one of the remaining two options better answers our question regarding the identity of Darius the Mede.

The fourth option also makes a lot of sense, that Cyrus awarded this honor, role, and title of Darius the Mede to general Ugbaru as a reward for his successful plan that allowed the Persian army to enter the capital city secretly and to overtake it for Cyrus and his growing empire. But...

The fifth option makes even more sense than the fourth one for the additional reason that Ugbaru died a month after taking Babylon and could not have ruled for fourteen years. Plus, assuming that Cyrus did not leave Babylon right away and before his capable general died, he actually appointed a second general by the similar name Gubaru (Gobryas – the Greek spelling of the name in Herodotus and Xenophon) as his satrap and governor of the Babylonian region. Indeed, Xenophon states that the generals “Gadatas and Gobryas” planned and implemented the stealth attack on Babylon. Here we are confronted with two names that are different from the more familiar Ugbaru and Gubaru, which is not unusual for Ancient Near Eastern documents, including the Hebrew scriptures of the Bible.

One, of course, wonders if Ugbaru and Gubaru are the same person since the names differ only by the transposition of the “U” and the “G,” which would mean that somebody misspelled the name at least once in his writings. However, scholars indicate that the Akkadian “Ug” is written very differently from “Gu” in the Nabonidus Chronicle of Babylon, which makes it unlikely that someone misspelled the first name so that these two men are the same. In addition, the Jewish historian Josephus, writing about A.D. 100, states that Cyrus defeated Babylon with his “kinsman,” Darius, the son of Astyages, who was Cyrus’ uncle

and former king of the Median Empire. But this still may be Gubaru, whose military name was Gubaru and who acted as a backup general to the more experienced Ugbaru, so that Gubaru acquired the title Darius, i.e., “The Royal One,” when he assumed the governance of the Babylonian people. And he may very well have been a Mede as the son of Astyages.

Now that we have taken a brief look at the five options, let us consider some additional information. To begin, I think that Daniel 9:1 helps rule out the first and second options, so that neither Nabonidus nor Cyrus was Darius. This verse reads in the NAS95,

Daniel 9:1 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans —

Since Darius is said to be “of Median descent” and Nabonidus was of Assyrian and Babylonian descent, the first option is most likely not correct. Daniel also writes that Darius “was made” the king of the Babylonians. The form of the Hebrew verb is *hophal*, which is the passive version of the *hiphil*, which in turn typically has a causative meaning. A good example of the *hiphil* are the three times in Exodus when it is used to refer to God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart. One of these times is Exodus 9:12,

Exodus 9:12 And Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not listen to them, just as Yahweh had spoken to Moses.

Literally the text reads, “And Yahweh caused Pharaoh’s heart to harden,” indicating that the moral orientation of the heart of the Egyptian king was pointed away from God because of the transcendent causation of God. Similarly, in Daniel 9:1, it is said literally that Darius “was caused to be made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans.” It is possible that Daniel is referring to God in His sovereignty who caused Darius to become king just as He hardened Pharaoh’s heart. However, I think it makes more sense to attribute the causation to another human being, indeed to Cyrus, the king of Persia. Cyrus existentially caused this man to become king by appointing him Darius the Mede. The point is, though, that Darius literally “was caused to become king” by someone else on earth who had the power and authority to do so. And Cyrus is the best candidate, which also means that Darius is not Cyrus since it hardly makes sense that Daniel would want to point out that Cyrus was made (passive voice!) king by Cyrus.

We should also consider Daniel 6:28 for help answering our question,

Daniel 6:28 So this Daniel enjoyed success in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Daniel wrote 2:5-7:28 in Aramaic instead of in Hebrew, but the similarity in languages makes it fairly easy to consider that there are two options for how to interpret the above Aramaic verse—either

- 1) that Daniel was a successful, royal court official for first Darius and then subsequently Cyrus who followed him, or
- 2) that Daniel was a respected advisor concurrently for Darius locally in Babylon and for Cyrus, wherever he might have been, especially in Ecbatana once he made his way back there.

Combining this verse with the information both in Daniel 5:31 that “Darius the Mede received” the Babylonian kingdom when the Persians overran the city of Babylon and in Daniel 9:1 that Darius “was made” king by Cyrus (implied), I think that it makes more sense to conclude that Daniel is referring to the reigns of Darius and Cyrus as occurring at the same time and not one after the other. Therefore, Darius of Mede exercised his authority in Babylon while Cyrus exercised his in other parts of the empire. And Daniel was a bona fide counselor for both in Babylon, even though he may not have seen Cyrus again as time went on.

To repeat, I think that we can conclude that neither Nabonidus nor Cyrus was Darius the Mede. This still leaves options #3-#5, i.e., Harpagus, Ugbaru, and Gubaru respectively. If we did not have the information

about Harpagus and his becoming the governor of Hyrcania before 539 B.C., it would seem rather easy to pick him as our answer, because he originally led the army of the Median king, Astyages, and, therefore, was most likely a Mede himself. However, the sources indicate that Astyages was either Cyrus' uncle or his father-in-law (or both?), meaning that even Cyrus himself could be identified as a Mede or a Persian just as Nabonidus was a Babylonian and an Assyrian. Therefore, just because someone worked for the Medes did not necessarily guarantee he was a pure Mede. This further allows for the Persian generals Ugbaru and Gubaru to have Median blood flowing in their veins if there was this much intermixing of rival peoples and kingdoms. Therefore, Harpagus could have acquired the title Darius the Mede as the new king of Babylon.

But we should look more closely at Daniel 5:31,

[Daniel 5:31](#) So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

In poetic fashion, we could translate the Aramaic words for “Darius” and “the Mede” (*daryavesh madaya*) as “Darius of the Medes,” because *madaya* (“the Mede” in the NAS95) is a dual form, i.e., referring to double the Medes that at least hints at a plural meaning like the more explicit plural *maday* in Daniel 6:8, 12, & 15. In other words, it sounds as though Darius was truly a Mede since he was “of the Medes,” and, with the data available, the best candidate for this characteristic is Harpagus. And why not give the man, who himself apparently was a Mede, who helped defeat the Median king, Astyages, and who was the former king’s highest-ranking military officer, the title “The Royal One” and emphasize that he was of Median descent? Therefore, even though Harpagus does not appear in any accounts concerning the Persian victory over Babylon, perhaps he came from Hyrcania and was there to assist Ugbaru in taking the city, and Cyrus rewarded him for his continued loyalty by now giving him authority over the Babylonian people—especially after Ugbaru died shortly after taking Babylon.

However, cuneiform tablets from this area that have been analyzed to have been written about 535 to 525 B.C. contain warnings that violating certain laws of the land would entail “the guilt of a sin against Gubaru, the Governor of Babylon and of the district beyond the river [west of the Euphrates].” As I said above, it seems more likely that Cyrus would have appointed Gubaru and not Ugbaru the “Governor of Babylon” since the latter died a month after accomplishing the Persian victory over the city. But concerning a possible contradiction and the obscure nature of ancient information, the Nabonidus Chronicle from that time states that “Gobryas [the Greek spelling of Gubaru] the Governor of Gutium and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle.” Nevertheless, it is possible that the Chronicle is not misspelling Ugbaru’s name but fails to mention him, the real hero, because it was more important to the author to refer to his lieutenant, Gubaru, who went on to govern the area.

Because Ugbaru died very soon after his brilliant victory over the city of Babylon, I think that the additional data above points mainly to Gubaru as Darius the Mede and not to any of the other men, whether Nabonidus, Cyrus, Harpagus, or Ugbaru. Therefore, my vote for the identity of Darius the Mede is Gubaru, a secondary and surviving general of the Persian army, who also may have been the son of the Median king, Astyages, Cyrus’ uncle, while Harpagus became and remained satrap of Hyrcania in the east.

As long as we are in Daniel’s geographical and chronological arena, we might as well take note of other points of interest in his book and from the following list of successor rulers over the Ancient Near East from Nabonidus/Belshazzar to the time of Jesus. We will start with Daniel 6:1,

[Daniel 6:1](#) It seemed good to Darius to appoint 120 satraps over the kingdom, that they would be in charge of the whole kingdom,...

The year would still be 539 B.C., and Cyrus has left for some other part of the Persian Empire. Here, Darius is exercising his rightful authority over the area of the former Babylonian kingdom and placing “120 satraps” under his satrapy. Chapter 6 is the famous Daniel in the lion’s den story where his enemies appeal to Darius in the following way,

Daniel 6:8 “Now, O king, establish the injunction [to put to death anyone who worships a different god besides Darius] and sign the document so that it may not be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked.”

For our purposes, these men invoke “the law of the Medes and Persians,” which demonstrates that the Medes had been and still were influential in the region. This adds to our confidence that Darius of the Medes refers to a leader of high regard and status.

It then seems strange, but the next chapter in Daniel begins,

Daniel 7:1 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon Daniel saw a dream and visions in his mind as he lay on his bed; then he wrote the dream down and related the following summary of it.

In other words, the text goes back in time approximately ten years, from 539 B.C. to 549 B.C. to the first year of Belshazzar’s reign as king in Babylon and to the fifth year of Nabonidus’ reign as king when he was in Taima, Arabia. By doing so, the book switches from the life of Daniel to the visions and revelations given to him. This is clear also from the beginnings of the next three chapters,

Daniel 8:1 In the third year of the reign of Belshazzar the king a vision appeared to me, Daniel, subsequent to the one which appeared to me previously.

Daniel 9:1 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans —

Daniel 10:1 In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a message was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar; and the message was true and one of great conflict, but he understood the message and had an understanding of the vision.

Daniel 8:1, regarding “the third year of the reign of Belshazzar the king,” is speaking of Daniel in 547/546 B.C., while Daniel 9:1 that speaks of “the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent” refers to 539 B.C. when Cyrus conquered Babylon and appointed Gubaru his governor of the former kingdom. Then chapters 10-12 are a vision that Daniel received in “the third year of Cyrus king of Persia.” Assuming chapters 7-12 depict visions and revelations in chronological order, Daniel 10:1 is not talking about 559 B.C. when Cyrus became king of Persia, but about either 537 B.C., almost three years after he conquered Babylon, or 535 B.C., almost three years after his coronation ceremony in the city. We remember that Darius the Mede ruled Babylon for two years while Cyrus was gone, and Cyrus had left the city soon after taking it. Then, Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king, returned in 537 B.C. for his official crowning as king of Babylon. My guess is that because Daniel mentions Cyrus and not Darius, the year is 535 B.C., three years after Cyrus publicly ascended to the throne of Babylon.

Plus, if Daniel was born in 620 B.C., this last vision came to him “in the third year of Cyrus” when he was approximately 85 years old. And maybe Daniel lived only another few years as he approached the ripe old age of 90, having lived through a tumultuous time in Babylonian history and having received from God visions and revelations concerning the future.

Then here is the list first of Persian kings, starting with Cyrus,

Cyrus the Great	559-529 B.C.
Conquered Babylon in 539 B.C.	
Darius the Mede (Governor of Babylon)	539-530 B.C.
Cambyses, Cyrus’ elder son, who conquered Egypt	529-523 B.C.
Guamata, Pseudo Smerdis, Cyrus’ younger son	523-522 B.C.
Darius Hystaspis (Darius I)	522-485 B.C.
Lost the Battle of Marathon (490 B.C.)	
Xerxes, who invaded Greece	485-464 B.C.
Lost the Battles of Salamis and Thermopylae (480 B.C)	

Artaxerxes	464-424 B.C.
Darius II	423-404 B.C.
Artaxerxes II	404-359 B.C.
Artaxerxes III	359-338 B.C.
Arses	338-336 B.C.
Darius III	336-331 B.C.

The fourth major king was Darius Hystaspis, who was also Darius I of the entire Persian Empire seven years after the death of Cyrus the Great. This man was not Darius the Mede but a true successor to Cyrus and who became king of all Persia in 522 B.C. when he was about twenty-eight years old. He is known for having attempted to expand his empire into Greece, but he lost to the Greek forces at the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. Next, his son Xerxes made another foray into Greece but, ten years later, like his father, he lost the sea Battle of Salamis and the land Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C.

The Persian Empire continued until 331 B.C., but it had been effectively conquered when Alexander the Great marched his Greek and Macedonian army east and, in 333 B.C., defeated Darius III at the Battle of Issus a few miles east of Tarsus where the apostle Paul would be born over three hundred years later. Below is only a two-line summary of the Greek leaders, starting with Alexander.

Alexander the Great, died in Babylon	335-323 B.C.
Conquered Persia in 331 B.C.	
Successors to Alexander the Great	323 to 63 B.C. and 30 B.C.

Alexander remained in the east for the rest of his life, coming close to wearing out his homesick army until they refused in 325 B.C. to march any farther east than India. Their imperious leader then made the knucklehead move of marching 30,000 of his soldiers (half his army; the rest went by sea—lucky them!) west across the Gedrosian Desert in what is now southern Pakistan. He lost at least a third of his soldiers, along with most of their livestock and baggage train, to the heat and dehydration during the 60-day journey. Two years later in 323 B.C., Alexander himself died in the city at the center of our story, Babylon.

His four generals subsequently divided up his empire, and two of them began a series of kings who ruled over the individual empires of the Seleucids in Syria (a total of thirty rulers) and the Ptolemies in Egypt (a total of twenty-five rulers) that figured prominently in the history of the Jews from 323 B.C. to 63 B.C. for the Seleucids and to 30 B.C. for the Ptolemies. The date of 63 B.C. is when the Romans took control of the land of Israel under General Pompey. In 30 B.C., Octavian defeated the combined navies of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, ending any power that the Egyptian Ptolemies had used to exercise authority over Judea. Three years later Octavian became Augustus Caesar and ruled the Roman Empire from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14 during the time when Jesus was born. Then, Tiberius Caesar ruled as emperor (A.D. 14-37) when he was crucified, risen, and ascended.

That should be enough for now about Darius the Mede and the Ancient Near East.