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BELSHAZZAR'S FEAST AND FEATS:  
THE LAST PRINCE OF BABYLON IN ANCIENT EASTERN AND WESTERN SOURCES\*

Giulia F. Grassi

“I received the 3rd Act, with a great deal of pleasure, as you can imagine, and you may believe that I think it a very fine and sublime Oratorio”. On October 3rd, 1744, Händel wrote these lines to thank his librettist Charles Jennens, who had finally completed the text for the oratorio *Belshazzar*. The libretto, “quite one of the best with which he [Händel] ever had to deal”,<sup>1</sup> contains a very simple story which can be summarized as follows:

Nitocris, mother of Belshazzar, king of Babylon, thinks about the mutability of the empires, aware of the imminent fall of Babylon. In fact, Cyrus, with his Persian army, is besieging the city. Cyrus, with the help of Gobrias, a Babylonian fled to the Persians after his son's murder by Belshazzar, makes plans to take the city: he wants to divert the course of the Euphrates. In the meantime, Belshazzar organizes a feast and drinks from the sacred vessels taken from the temple of Jerusalem. During the sacrilege, a hand appears writing on the wall of the banquet hall. The Babylonian sages can not explain the inscription, which can finally be read by the Jewish prophet Daniel, called for on Nitocris' suggestion. Daniel foretells the fall of the Babylonian empire and indeed the Persian army captures the city and breaches the palace, slaying Belshazzar.

Sir Charles Jennens' libretto for Händel is remarkable for its psychological observations,<sup>2</sup> for its coherence and for the harmony of its parts; but it was probably a very demanding task, since its author had to use different sources, quite contradictory and elusive. The name Belshazzar and the core of the plot (the banquet and the writing on the wall) are provided by chapter 5 of the Book of

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1. Young 1949, 136.

2. See Lang 1966, esp. 431-432.

Daniel; but, in order to integrate this meagre narration, Jennens had to pick up elements both from the Bible (the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah) and from Classical authors. In Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* he could find the episode of Gobryas, the description of the capture of Babylon and probably some cues for the portrayal of Cyrus. The diversion of the Euphrates is contained both in Xenophon and in Herodotus, but only the latter mentions queen Nitocris.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noticing that neither Herodotus nor Xenophon mentions Belshazzar by name.

As many writers and scholars before and after him, Jennens perceived the difficulty to reconcile the different literary data we have on Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon. After the discovery of Uruk in 1854, we know that Belshazzar was an historical character and not a mere invention by the author of *Daniel*.<sup>4</sup> He was the powerful son and co-regent of the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus.<sup>5</sup> However, apart from the improvement of our historical knowledge thanks to the Akkadian sources, the situation of the literary tradition about Belshazzar and the fall of Babylon is as puzzling and complex as in Jennens' time.

### Biblical and parabiblical sources

#### *Daniel, its translations and its apocrypha*

The most important attestation of Belshazzar in the Hebrew sources is contained in the Book of Daniel and the Jewish tradition was the only one to preserve Belshazzar's name.

As well known, in the first part of the book, Daniel is the protagonist of four court tales,<sup>6</sup> two of them in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, one in the reign of Belshazzar (בלשאצר) and one in the

3. For Jennens' libretto see in particular Dean 1959, 435-438. For Jennens' theological and political purposes in writing the texts for Händel's *Belshazzar* see Smith 1995, 25-34, 317-319.
4. As frequently assumed before: see Collins 1993, 32. In the excavations at Uruk in 1854, Nabonidus' account of his restoration of the Eanna, ending with the prayer for himself and his son, was discovered (see Gadd 1929, 234-236): "[and as for] Belshazzar, the first son proceeding from my loins, lengthen his days; let him not turn to sinning" (transl. Dougherty 1929, 94).
5. In 553, Nabonidus left for a military campaign to Lebanon, Transjordan and Arabia, where he stayed in the oasis of Teima for many years. He was forced to appoint a substitute in Babylon and his choice fell on his son Belshazzar, who became governor of Babylon and co-regent at the same time (see Beaulieu 1989, 149-185). From the 38 archival texts which mention Belshazzar (see Beaulieu 1989, 156-157) and from other contemporary documents, we may infer that he was a pre-eminent businessman in the years shortly after his father's accession (*ibid.*, 93-98) and that he shared with Nabonidus substantial privileges, which were usually reserved to the king only: he shared sacrificial meals and royal offerings with his father and he is present in the formula closing the oaths (see Beaulieu, 188-192). From the institutional point of view, Belshazzar was and remained a crown prince, i.e. he never became king, while on the other hand Nabonidus kept for himself all royal privileges. Nonetheless, Belshazzar appears alongside his father in the greeting formulae of a letter from an official (*Ibid.*, 186-188), and in a prayer embedded within a dream report (*ibid.*, 191-192). On the role of Belshazzar see also Dougherty 1929.
6. For *Daniel* as a court tale see Humphreys 1973; Collins 1975; Niditch – Doran 1977; Holm 2005, who stresses also the episodic character of the book, a "story collection".

reign of Darius the Mede.<sup>7</sup> In the first two episodes Daniel, who is called Belṭeshazzar (בלטשאצר) at court,<sup>8</sup> interprets two dreams of Nebuchadnezzar. The first concerns the end of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, the second Nebuchadnezzar's impiety and subsequent madness and animal-like behaviour, which takes place shortly after the interpretation of the dream. The king would recover his mental health after seven years when he prayed and blessed "the (God) Most high" (עליא).

Immediately after this conclusion, chapter five starts abruptly presenting Belshazzar, said to be king and Nebuchadnezzar's son, while he is banqueting at his court with his nobles.<sup>9</sup> Under the influence of wine, he orders to bring the vessels taken by his father from the temple of Jerusalem, he drinks from them and makes his nobles, "his queen" (שגלתה) and the concubines drink from them. "They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone. At that moment, the fingers of a man's hand came forth and wrote opposite the candelabrum on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace and the king saw a palm of a hand that was writing" (5, 4-5). The king is scared and his terror is depicted with sarcasm. He calls for his sages, but none of them can read the inscription. The queen (מלכתא) suggests to look for Daniel, who accepts to come and rebukes Belshazzar for not having kept in his mind his father's impiety and punishment. Daniel can read and interpret the mysterious inscription, which turns out to be the announce of the end of Belshazzar's reign. In spite of the terrible prediction, the king orders to reward Daniel<sup>10</sup> but at this point the narration finishes as abruptly as it started with the assertion: "That night Belshazzar, the Chaldaean king, was killed" (5, 30) and chapter six concludes the previous clause by stating "and Darius the Mede received the kingship at the age of sixty-two years" (6, 1).

7. The book is written partly in Aramaic and partly in Hebrew and the two languages do not correspond to the literary division of the text, even if the majority of the narrative part is in Aramaic and the majority of the apocalyptic part in Hebrew. The Greek translations are quite different from the Masoretic texts and include some deuterocanonical material. For the differences between Aramaic Daniel and Greek Daniel see in particular Meadowcroft 1995.
8. Dan 1:7. The name is apparently very similar to the name of Belshazzar, but the etymologies are different, the former being transcription of *Balaṭ-šar-ušur*, "Protect the life of the king!", or *Balaṭ-šu-ušur*, "Protect his life!", the latter of *Bēl-šar-ušur*, "Preserve the king, O god Bel!". The MT keeps the difference between the two, but the vocalisation of the former is wrong and implies a reference to the god Bel: indeed, in 4:5 Nebuchadnezzar says that Daniel is called Belteshazzar "as the name of my god" (כשם אלהי). The Old Greek text and Theodotion transliterate both Belshazzar and Belteshazzar as *Βαλτασαρ*. Shea (1988, 74-76) suggests that Belṭeshazzar is a corruption of Belshazzar, "contaminated with the insertion of a nonsense letter".
9. Neither the MT nor Theodotion give any explanation about the reason for the feast, while the Old Greek version has a curious preface to chapter 5 in which is stated that the reason was the inauguration of his palace (or his reign: see Collins 1993, 237). The statement is not present in the main text. For the preface to chapter 5 see Montgomery 1927, 267; Collins 1993, 241.
10. One of the rewards is to govern as *lly* in the kingdom. The term *lly* has been interpreted as "third" in the kingdom and in this case it has been suggested that this is in harmony with the years of co-regency of Nabonidus and Belshazzar (Dougherty 1929, 196; Shea 1982a, 138-139). However, there is no mention of Nabonidus in the text and Montgomery suggested that "the term is a true reminiscence of old Bab. Officialdom, where the Akk. *šalšu* was a high official title, = "Thirdling" or "Triumvir", similar in its use to the Heb. equivalent *šališ*" (1927, 234). See also Collins 1993, 247.

The episode is vividly depicted and can be probably considered the most impressive in the whole narrative part of the book, but it poses many problems from the very beginning.

The first inconsistency is that Belshazzar is presented as “king” (מלכא), while it is certain that he was crown prince (*mār šarri*, “son of the king”), and he never detained the actual kingship. Moreover, Nebuchadnezzar is presented as the father of Belshazzar and this is of course historically false. The most frequent explanation is that the term “son” (בר) can be interpreted also as “grandson” and “father” (אב) as “grandfather” or “ancestor”.<sup>11</sup>

The situation is even more puzzling if we consider that the Bible seems to imply that Amel-Marduk (Evil-Merodach) is the son and successor of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 52, 31; 2 Kings 25, 27). This incongruence was noticed by later authors, who considered Evil-Merodach and Belshazzar as brothers (Jerome in Eusebius’ *Chronici Canonēs*),<sup>12</sup> as father and son (some *midrashim*: see below) or tried to justify it in some other way.<sup>13</sup>

The most logical explanation seems to be that confusion was made between Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus, who bear vaguely similar names. Nabonidus is never recorded in the Bible; but it had been long suspected that the tale of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness derived from a reinterpretation of Nabonidus’ stay at Teima, presumably because it was difficult to understand in itself and thus perceived as a manifestation of insanity.<sup>14</sup> This hypothesis was confirmed in 1956, when Milik published in the *Revue Biblique*<sup>15</sup> some Aramaic fragments which seemed to be correlated with the canonical Book of Daniel.<sup>16</sup>

11. e.g. Dougherty 1929, 194, note 642; Hasel 1981, 44. The interpretation goes back to Jerome: “Quod autem Baldasaris ‘patrem’ Nabuchodonosor uocat, non facit errorem scientibus sanctae scripturae consuetudinem, qua ‘patres’ omnes proavi et maiores uocantur” (*In Daniele* V, 2). Many attempts have been made in order to establish a kinship between Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus (see Dougherty 1929 and, more recently, Hasel 1981, 44-45), but it seems more and more likely that Nabonidus had no claim at all on the Babylonian throne. The correct succession of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty is: Nabû-apal-ušur (“Nabopolassar”, 626-605), succeeded by his son Nabû-kudurri-ušur (“Nebuchadnezzar”, 605-562), succeeded by his son Amêl-Marduk (“Evil-Merodach”, 562-560), killed by his brother-in-law Nergal-šar-ušur (“Neriglissar”, 560-556), succeeded by his young son Lâbâši-Marduk, assassinated after a few months of reign by conspirators, and among them Nabû-nâ’id (“Nabonidus”, 556-539).
12. Before the discovery of the inscriptions from Ur, many scholars — and among them Carsten Niebhur — thought that Belshazzar and Evil-Merodach were the same person (see Dougherty 1929, 13).
13. “Where is Evil[Merodach]? R. Eleazar said: It is written thus in order to bring together two wicked men, two destroyers, two men puffed up with pride. R. Samuel ben Naḥman said: In order to bring together two cases of an interrupted reign” (*Genesis Rabbah* LXXXV, 2, translation by Freedman).
14. For Nabonidus’ madness see Beaulieu 2007; for Nebuchadnezzar’s madness Henze 1999.
15. Milik 1956.
16. The fragments came from Cave 4 at Qumran and the editor entitled the text “4Q Prière de Nabonide”. In this fragmentary and difficult text Nabonidus says to have been “smitten by a bad disease by decree of God in Teima” (כתיש] בשחנא באישא בפתגם אלהא בתימן), and to have been healed after seven years with the help of a “Jewish (...) diviner” (גזר (...) יהודי) (cf. Zech. 8:23 and Esth. 2:5), who exhorted him to pray “the Most High God” (but the words are in lacuna), when until then Nabonidus prayed to “the gods of silver and gold, [bronze, iron], wood, stone, clay” (אלהי כסף וזהבא [נהשא פרזלא] אעא אבנא חספא). The similarities with Daniel are of course quite striking (see Collins 1996, 85-87; Meyer 1962, 53-94; Sack 1983, 64-67; Garcia Martinez 1992, 129-130; Henze 1999, 52-73): both kings are afflicted by a disease for seven years, both of them are aided by a Jew and both of them are allowed to recover their health by abandoning an impious behaviour and praying the “true” God. Another parallel is the terminology used

Another evidence of the possible influence of the memory of Nabonidus in the portrait of Nebuchadnezzar resides in the importance accorded to the interpretation of dreams in the two episodes concerning the latter. In fact, it is known that Nabonidus had a great consideration for dreams: in inscription 13 he pretends to have left Teima after a nightmare and in inscription 1 he reports an interesting dream in which he declares to have seen his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar, whom he asked to relate which were the favorable signs for his accession to the throne.<sup>17</sup>

The core of the chapter, the mysterious handwriting on the wall, is one of the most haunting and ghostly images of the Bible. The act of writing seems to be important in the Book of Daniel<sup>18</sup> and the decipherment and/or the interpretation of a difficult text is common in folk tales, especially when the success of a wise man is the focus of the narration. Of course, Daniel can read the inscription with the support of divine help and the power of the “true” God is one of the main themes of the book.

It is worth noticing that it is not Belshazzar who has the idea to call for Daniel: it is the queen (מלכה) and this detail, according to Jerome, has aroused Porphyry's irony.<sup>19</sup> Porphyry clearly considers the queen as Belshazzar's consort, but the identity of the lady is still debated.<sup>20</sup> Since ancient times, commentators have usually considered this woman as the queen mother or the queen grandmother.<sup>21</sup>

for the idols in Dan. 5, during Belshazzar's feast, and in the Prayer: the materials are almost the same (two are in lacuna), except for clay, mentioned only in the Prayer where there is an inversion between silver and gold. See also Collins, 246. See the parallel expression in Revelation 9:20. Such closeness implies that the two texts are somehow cognates. Some scholars believe that Daniel depends upon the Prayer, while others prefer to think about a kind of “common ancestry” (for a very conservative view see Hasel 1981, 40, who thinks that the prayer is later than Daniel 4), but in any case we may reach the conclusion that the traditions about Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar became mixed up.

17. For the inscriptions see Beaulieu 1989, 152 and 110-112. Beaulieu considers Nabonidus “the only Neo-Babylonian ruler who reports dreams in his inscriptions and who claims to have made important decisions based on their ominous content” (Beaulieu 1989, 218).
18. See Polaski 2004.
19. *In Daniele* V, 10a: “euiliget ergo Porphyrius qui eam Baldasaris somniauit uxorem, et illudit plus scire quam maritum”. Porphyry was the only critic of the authenticity of Daniel until Uriel da Costa (XVIIth century; see Bickerman 1967, 127-135; Collins 1992, 25). Unfortunately, we know Porphyry's argumentations only through their desultory quotation by Jerome.
20. The previous mention of the queen uses the term שגל, which is a loanword from Neo-Assyrian *Míša ekalli* and means “queen”. It has often been understood as “mistress”, “concubine”, and it is placed immediately before the term להנה, “concubine”. The term שגלתא as vocalized in the MT should be a plural, it is rendered as plural (αἱ παλλακαί, “the concubines”) in Theodotion (the Septuagint does not mention the presence of women at the banquet) and it is usually translated as a plural in the catholic versions. Nevertheless, the hypothesis to intend it as a singular is old: it is attested in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 4a) and it is followed by the rabbinic tradition and by Calvin (cf. Gallé 1900, 53; Goldwurm 2002, 159). It would be logical to suppose that the term שגל indicates Belshazzar's wife, while the different word מלכה indicates the queen mother, who seems indeed to have a good memory on old matters of the court.
21. *In Daniele* V, 10a : “Hanc Iosephus auiam Baldasaris, Origenes matrem scribunt”. Ibn Ezra considers her Belshazzar's grandmother, while Levi ben Gershom does not exclude that she can be Belshazzar's mother (see also Gallé 1900, 55). In the former hypothesis, the queen is considered to be Nebuchadnezzar's consort and Belshazzar's grandmother. The latter hypothesis tries to reconcile Dan. 5

Of course, the easiest view is to admit that the author of the Book of Daniel just ignored — or chose to ignore — the existence of Evil-Merodach and that he considered Belshazzar, as he seems to have done from the beginning to the end of the narrative part, Nebuchadnezzar's son.<sup>22</sup> The confusion between Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar, already noted for Qumran, strengthens this view. The queen is probably meant to be Nebuchadnezzar's wife, but we may wonder if the strong personality of Nabonidus' mother, Adda-guppi, crucial for Nabonidus' success,<sup>23</sup> had left traces in Babylonian (oral?)<sup>24</sup> traditions and has been used in the Daniel *novella*. It is thus plausible that the memory of a strong-willed queen was preserved among the Jews and that it was associated with Belshazzar, since Adda-guppi died, aged 104, during his regency.<sup>25</sup> Probably, the firmness of the queen was intended to sharpen Belshazzar's substantial weakness: he is impious, lascivious, cowardly, and unable to control his body,<sup>26</sup> he has incompetent sages at his court and he is said to be simply "killed", without even the name of a murderer.<sup>27</sup> This portrayal is unusual in Daniel, since the other kings are depicted in quite a favourable way: even Nebuchadnezzar could redeem himself by praying to the "Most High". Belshazzar is incapable to learn from his father's fate and this is why he meets such a sudden fate and loses his power.<sup>28</sup>

Belshazzar is said to be succeeded by Darius the Mede. Chapter 6 is set at Darius' court and it ends with the assertion that Daniel continued to prosper under Cyrus the Persian. Darius the Mede is never attested in other testimonies and his identification is one of the most studied and disputed aspects of the Book of Daniel.<sup>29</sup> However, as argued by Grabbe, "there is no place for his activities

with the Biblical data which mention Evil-Merodach as Nebuchadnezzar's successor. In this view, Belshazzar is seen as Evil-Merodach's son and the queen is supposed to be his mother, i.e. Evil-Merodach's wife.

22. This is the interpretation of many modern commentators, e.g. Collins 1993, 248; Montgomery 1927, 257; Hartman – Di Lella 1978, 188. For a conservative view see Shea, who considers Daniel "aware of Nabonidus' existence" (Shea 1982a, 145).
23. Adda-guppi was a devotee – perhaps a priest – of the moon god Sin of Harran. In an "autobiography" shaped by Nabonidus, she is given credit for introducing him to the court. There, it is claimed that she was ninety-five years old when her son became ruler; so he too was into his mature years then. Her "autobiographical" text has two versions, one published by Pognon 1907, 1-13, the other by Gadd 1958, 46-56. For its literary genre see Longman 1991, 97-103.
24. The theory of an Aramaic oral source for Daniel 2-6 has been enounced by Polak 1993. According to him, also the name of Belshazzar could have been preserved by oral tradition (260).
25. "On the fifth day of the month Nisan the queen mother died in Dur-karashu which (is on) the bank of the Euphrates upstream from Sippar. The prince and his army were in mourning for three days (and) there was (an official) mourning period" (*The Chronicle of Nabonidus*, 13-14; Grayson 1975a, 107). The presence of Belshazzar ("the prince") with the army here may testify some hostilities between the Babylonian and Cyrus (see Beaulieu 1989, 197-203). The fact that Adda-guppi died before the fall of Babylon has been taken by conservative scholars as the proof that she cannot be the queen mentioned in Daniel (e.g. Shea 1982, 137). However, the historical accuracy is far from being a main concern for the author of Daniel and it is hard to consider the narration as an "eyewitness account" (*ibid.*, 146).
26. See Wolters 1991.
27. See Polaski 2004, 658-660.
28. See Collins 1997, 171.
29. See e.g. Colless 1992; Yamauchi 1990, 88-89; Shea 1982b.

during and after the fall of Babylon".<sup>30</sup> Grabbe also denies the possibility — suggested by some scholars, particularly by Shea — that Darius the Mede should be identified with the Ugbaru cited in the *Chronicle of Nabonidus* as the governor of Gutium, the first to enter Babylon, destined to die there few days later.<sup>31</sup> Shea's attempt has the aim to demonstrate Daniel's historicity and Grabbe is probably right in claiming that the identification is impossible at historical level. In constructing Darius the Mede, some elements seem to be taken from the figure of Darius I,<sup>32</sup> some others are "inherited clichés of folk-tradition about the Persians".<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the presence of a Mede is required in Daniel at this point of the narration, because the book mentions the sequence of Babylonian, Median and Persian Empires in the narrative part, with the addition of the Greeks in the apocalyptic part.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the alternation of the monarchies of Medes and Persians was a common idea in the Second Commonwealth Judaism: Babylonia was taken by the Persian Cyrus, while the prophecies — and the fall of Israel — indicated Media as the "avenger" of the Jewish people.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it has been suggested that it was not immediately perceived as obvious that the defeat of Astyages by Cyrus caused the end of the Median empire and not a simple dynastic turn-over.<sup>36</sup>

All these elements point to the fact that Darius the Mede is not an historical, but a literary character — just as Daniel is not an historical, but a literary, fictional text. We may wonder if the author of Daniel himself intended his story as fictional: such a great number of historical errors in the book — first of all Nebuchadnezzar's paternity of Belshazzar — is quite striking and it would be interesting to know if it should be considered deliberate or not. Sometimes biblical writers seem to use crass inconsistencies in the narration when they want to alert their audience about the fictional aspect of the story.<sup>37</sup> Daniel might thus be considered a Jewish *novella*, as well as Judith and Esther.<sup>38</sup> Even if it is difficult to know how these narrations were perceived, "it is likely that they

30. Grabbe 1988, 211.

31. The description of the capture of the city runs as follows: "In the month of Tishri, when Cyrus did battle at Opis, on the [bank of] the Tigris against the army of Akkad, the people of Akkad retreated. He carried off the plunder (and) slaughtered the people. On the fourteenth day Sippar was captured without a battle. Nabonidus fled. On the sixteenth day Ugbaru, governor of the Gutu, and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle. Afterwards, after Nabonidus retreated, he was captured in Babylon (...) On the night of eleventh of the month Marchesvan Ugbaru died. In the month [...] the king's wife died" (12-15; 22-23; Grayson 1975a, 109-111). The text quite agrees with the descriptions contained in Herodotus and in two other Akkadian sources, the *Cyrus Cylinder* and the *Dynastic Prophecy*. Both of them tell that Babylon was taken without a battle. For the former see Lecoq 1997, 181-185, for the latter Grayson 1975b, 24-37. However, it is unlikely that Babylon fell without resistance: see Briant 1996, 51-53. For Ugbaru/Gubaru, Persian Gaubaruva, see Dandamayev 1992, 72-73.

32. See Rowley 1935, 54-60; Shea 1988, 209.

33. Grabbe 1988, 213.

34. Collins 1993, 31. See also Wiesehöfer 2003.

35. Rowley 1935, 57-58. See also Segal 1994, I, 196. For the prophecies see Isaiah 13, 17 and Jeremiah 51, 11-33. Media actually destroyed the other Jewish enemy, Assyria.

36. Graf 1984.

37. See Sasson 1990, 248-249.

38. Wills 1994, 224. For Daniel see in particular 225-228. See also Berlin 2001.

were read as fictions, and even in some cases as satires or farces”.<sup>39</sup> These novellas had the tendency to grow and to absorb more novelistic material or details during the centuries, as we may detect from the Greek version of the book of Daniel (in particular the episode of Susanna),<sup>40</sup> but also from midrashic materials (see below).

If so, we may wonder if there is some memory of Ugbaru in the fictional “creation” of him. In other words, Darius the Mede seems to be an ideological construction of the author of Daniel 5-6, but it is not impossible that some hints of historical truth may have contributed to his formation. Historical elements are clearly part of the set of the Jewish novellas, as well as non-historical ones. Ahasuerus and Nebuchadnezzar, respectively cited in Esther and Judith, were effectively kings of Persia and Babylon, but the former could hardly have had Esther as “queen” and the latter was not “king of the Assyrians” – and the city he is besieging, Bethulia, apparently never existed. In this effort, it is possible to detect two aims: on one hand the author would provide an “historical” setting which could be familiar to his audience; on the other he would alert his readers about the fictional nature of the narration.

The memory of Ugbaru as historical figure could hardly have been preserved in the Jewish tradition, but the idea that Cyrus was “helped” in the conquering of Babylon and that he was not the first to enter the city could have been transmitted, even if in a confused way. It is worth remembering that the very name of Belshazzar has been handed down by the author of Daniel, who was at least partially aware of the oral traditions circulating on the fall of Babylon.

#### *Baruch and the Lives of the Prophets*

The deuterocanonical Book of Baruch, already known at Qumran, contains in its first part the mention of Belshazzar, who is considered once again Nebuchadnezzar’s son. The text is an exhortation to the Jews to pray for the life of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and to pray to receive from God the strength to live under their rule and to serve them for years.<sup>41</sup>

It is clear that the author considers Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar as father and son and as living and ruling in the same years. The only example of co-regency in the Neo-Babylonian era is that of Nabonidus and Belshazzar and it seems, once again, that there is a certain confusion between Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar. Moreover, the text cites Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar as the addressees of the same prayer, which immediately recalls the dream report in which Šum-ukin prays for “the well-being of Nabonidus, king of Babylon, my lord, and for the well-being of Belshazzar, the son of the king, my lord”.<sup>42</sup>

39. Wills 1994, 224.

40. Steussy 1993.

41. Bar 1, 11-12.

42. Translation by Beaulieu 1989, 192. The names of Nabonidus and his son were ranged together also in two petitions from Uruk (YOS VI, 11 and 150; see Beaulieu 1989, 192) and in some oaths from the Neo-Babylonian period (Dougherty 1929, 96-97; Beaulieu 1989, 190).

In another pseudepigraphic work, *The Lives of the Prophets*,<sup>43</sup> Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar are said to be son and father and are linked by means of a prayer. The text integrates the Biblical account with other legendary materials and it enjoyed a certain success among Christians, for it is preserved in many versions, including Syriac, Latin and Armenian. The oldest one is the so-called *recensio anonyma* in Greek<sup>44</sup> and Greek was perhaps the original language.<sup>45</sup>

One of the strongest evidence for a Greek original is the fact that the text seems to be based on the Old Greek translation of the Bible, and indeed the Babylonian name of Daniel and the name of Nebuchadnezzar's son are identical (Βαλτασαρ). The author was aware of the strangeness of such an equation and he tries to give an explanation, stating that "He (Nebuchadnezzar) called him Baltasar because he wanted to establish him coheir of his sons" (4, 21-22).<sup>46</sup>

The work relates only the episode of Nebuchadnezzar's madness and there is neither reference to Belshazzar's feast nor to Darius the Mede. Nevertheless, the writer obviously knows Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's son and makes a direct reference to him. He reports that "He (Daniel) prayed much for Nebuchadnezzar, at the appeal of Baltasar his son, when he became a wild animal and a domestic beast, in order that he might not die" (4, 6-8).

It is plain that the author considers Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar father and son and it is interesting that Belshazzar entreats Daniel to pray for his parent.

### Greek and Latin testimonies

#### *Herodotus*

Herodotus does not mention Belshazzar and Nabonidus in his *Histories*, but it is quite likely that they are present — at least to a certain extent — under the name Labynetus.

The first mention recurs in I, 74, where it is said that in the war between Lydians and Medes, immediately after an eclipse, the negotiators of the peace were Συέννεσίς τε ὁ Κίλιξ καὶ Λαβύνητος ὁ Βαβυλώνιος. In I, 77, is said that, during the war between Croesus and Cyrus, the Babylonian king, allied to the former, was Labynetus (ἔτυράννευε δὲ τὸν χρόνον τοῦτον τῶν Βαβυλωνίων Λαβύνητος). The third mention follows the description of the reign of queen Nitokris, who is depicted as the most eminent Babylonian queen. Herodotus says that Cyrus conducted war against Nitokris' son, who bore the name of his father, Labynetus, and reigned over the Assyrians (I, 188; Nitokris' reign is described in chapters 185-187).

43. It is dated probably to the first century AD and perhaps composed in Palestine by a Jew (see Hare 1985; Lusini 2000. *Contra*, Satran 1995, who suggests that the work is Christian and dated to the IVth or Vth century; for the Life of Daniel see in particular 79-96).

44. Critical edition by Scherman 1907.

45. See Hare 1985, 380; Lusini 2000, 536-539. Torrey 1946 is the strongest supporter of an original in Hebrew.

46. The translation is conducted on the edition by Scherman (1907).

The three passages are quite intriguing and many attempts have been made to identify the two Labynetus and Nitokris.<sup>47</sup> It is probably unwise to mix up Herodotus' narration and the historical Babylonian monarchs,<sup>48</sup> but it is important to notice that Herodotus was, even if in a vague way, aware of the existence of the Neo-Babylonian empire. It is unlikely that Herodotus had specific kings in his mind, but the reference to a strong-minded woman, mother of the last king of Babylon, can represent a trace of an oral tradition circulating about the end of the city, possibly mixed up with other traditions about oriental queens.

Curiously enough, Herodotus does not mention Labynetus during the capture of Babylon and he does not report what his destiny was. However, it is interesting to note that the Greek historian agrees with the *Chronicle of Nabonidus* in saying that Babylon was taken without a battle and his statement that the city was taken during a feast recalls the banquet in Dan. 5.

### *Xenophon*

Xenophon in his *Cyropaedia* does not mention the name of Belshazzar and Nabonidus: the Assyrian<sup>49</sup> kings are anonymous, but they are two and they are said to be father and son.

As regards the old king, the most impressive detail is that he is said to make a successful war against Syria and Arabia (I, 5, 2), and it is well known that Nabonidus actually left for a military campaign in 553 BC to Lebanon, Transjordan and finally Northern Arabia, where he lived for ten years.

As regards the young king, "one of the villains of the *Cyropaedia*",<sup>50</sup> he is presented for the first time when he is crown-prince and is making a raid against Cyrus, then, after his father's death, he succeeded him. The young king, unlike his father, is depicted as cruel: he murders a friend of him, Gobryas' son, just out of envy while they are hunting and this causes the betrayal of Gobryas (IV, VI, 1-10). Gobryas helps Cyrus to conquer Babylon and finally kills the young Assyrian king, together with Gadatas (VII, V, 26-30), another victim of the king's cruelty, castrated because of the appreciation expressed by a royal concubine (V, II, 28).

Xenophon's account is far from being historical, but it contains many interesting details. As regard the succession, even if Belshazzar never became a king and never succeeded his father, the military and political power he held in the period of co-regency may have created confusion and generated the idea of a turn-over on the throne of Babylon. The story about Gobryas is clearly fictional, but the material about the official who fled to Cyrus contains an element which recalls the Ugbaru mentioned in the *Chronicle of Nabonidus*. The names are very similar and the existence of a Gubaru conqueror of the city may be considered historical with little doubt, even if the status of

47. For Labynetus see Beaulieu 1989, 80-81; Dougherty 1929, 36-37; 187. For the identification of Nitokris with Adda-guppi see Röllig 1969, followed by D'Agostino 1994, 120-121; for her identification with Nebuchadnezzar see Baumgartner 1950, 96; for the idea that Nitokris is Naqi'a/Zakutu, Esarhaddon's mother, see Lewy 1952.

48. See Kuhrt 1995, 59-60.

49. Greek authors generally do not distinguish between Assyria and Babylonia.

50. Levine Gera 1993, 113. However, it should be kept in mind that the Akkadian sources are hostile to Nabonidus.

Gutium before the war is dubious. In fact, it is still discussed if Gutium was under Babylonian or under Persian rule and consequently if Gubaru betrayed the king of Babylon or if he was an officer of Cyrus from the very beginning, and his betrayal just an invention of Xenophon.<sup>51</sup> The historicity of the betrayal of Ugaru is highly disputed: but, once again, “truth” does not seem to be the goal of the literary traditions about the end of Babylon. Ugaru probably was not a traitor, but how was his participation to Cyrus’ expedition perceived and remembered? We still have problems in determining if Gutium was or not under Persian control when Cyrus marched against Babylon: was the situation clear to the contemporary spectators of the event, who, as it has been demonstrated, had problem even in realising that the Persian empire was completely different from the Median one?<sup>52</sup> It is likely that Gobryas’/Ugaru’s betrayal is not an “invention”, but just a misunderstanding on Xenophon’s part — a misunderstanding that perfectly fits his fictional and dramatic narration.

Another interesting element is the fact that Babylon is taken during a nocturnal feast and that the young king is killed in his palace by Gobryas and Gadatas. The information of the capture of Babylon during a feast agrees with Herodotus and the Book of Daniel (the banquet is probably to be intended as nocturnal, since the hand writes in front of the candelabrum),<sup>53</sup> the latter being close to Xenophon’s account also regarding the king’s murder.

### *Josephus*

The doubts that ancient authors had about the last years of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty and the importance of legendary elements are evident in the works of Josephus, who reports two contrasting versions.

In *Contra Apionem* he cites the Babylonian Hellenistic historian Berossus (IVth-IIIrd century BC), who is by far the most accurate author on the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, which he gives in the correct order.<sup>54</sup> “His (Neriglissar’s) son, Laborosoardoch, a mere boy, occupied it (*scil.* the throne)

51. For the first hypothesis, which attributes to Xenophon’s account a partial historicity see in particular Hallo 1957; for the second, which implies that the episode of the betrayal is a mere invention see Zadok 1981. It has been suggested that Gutium has been wrung from Babylonians by Cyrus several years before the fall of Babylon and the local governor has accepted the Persian rulership (Beaulieu 1989, 229-230, followed by Parpola 2003).
52. See Graf 1984; on the “inability to distinguish between Medes and Persian” see also Tuplin 2003 (the quotation is taken from page 353).
53. See however note 98 on the Aramaic word גברשתא.
54. Eusebius of Caesarea reports in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* and in his *Chronicon* (in the Latin translation by Jerome) the account of Berossus on the Neo-Babylonian dynasty (*Praeparatio Evangelica* IX, 40; *Chronicon*, I, XI), but he cites also Megasthenes (around 300 BC) — preserved by Abydenus (II-III century AD) — whose narration is very close to Berossus’ (*Praeparatio Evangelica* IX, 41; *Chronicon*, I, X, 3). The same order — with the exclusion of Labashi-Marduk — is given in a fragment of Alexander Polyhistor (I century BC) preserved by the Armenian translation of Eusebius’ *Chronicon*, in which there is also the mention of Nabonidus’ exile (see Verbrugge – Wickersham 1996, F10b, 61). It is likely that Josephus knew Berossus through the compendium by Polyhistor (*ibid.*, 28-29). As Polyhistor, Ptolemy does not put Labashi-Marduk in his *Κανὼν βασιλέων*, or *Ptolemaic Canon*, which mentions

for nine months, when, owing to the depraved disposition which he showed, a conspiracy was formed against him, and he was beaten to death by his friends. After his murder the conspirators held a meeting, and by common consent conferred the kingdom upon Nabonnedus, a Babylonian and one of their gang” (I, 20, transl. H. St. J. Thackeray). Then, after seventeen years of reign, Nabonidus is said to prepare his army to fight against Cyrus, but, after a defeat, he flees to Borsippa. Cyrus takes Babylon and besieges Borsippa. Nabonidus surrenders and Cyrus spares him and gives him Carmania<sup>55</sup> for his residence and here Nabonidus lives his remaining years and finally dies.

Berosus’ account agrees with cuneiform evidences in saying that Nabonidus was spared by Cyrus and sent into exile<sup>56</sup> and the description of Laborosoardoch is similar to the one given by Nabonidus in his inscription 1 (column IV), where it is stated that he was very young and unable to govern.

In Berosus’ account and in *Contra Apionem* there is no mention of Belshazzar, but in the *Jewish Antiquities* Josephus gives a completely different version, which tries to read the Biblical narration according to Berosus’ data and to historical facts.

The succession is still correct, but, after Labosordachos, Belshazzar, “who was called Naboandelos by the Babylonians” (X, 1) takes the throne.<sup>57</sup> The episode of the feast is reported (although Josephus considers the queen Belshazzar’s grandmother), but it is Cyrus who conquers the city in the seventeenth year of Belshazzar’s reign.<sup>58</sup> Darius the Mede is his ally and he is said to be the king of Media, Cyrus’ relative and Astyages<sup>59</sup> son. However, Darius does not become king of Babylon, but takes Daniel to his reign, Media. There is no mention of Belshazzar’s fate: he is captured with the city, without any statement about his death or his exile (X, 4). Evidently, Josephus is embarrassed, since the Bible mentions the death of the last “king” of Babylon, while Berosus speaks about exile. Josephus chooses silence about Belshazzar’s fate, but he tries to “rationalize” the errors of the Biblical narration every time he has the opportunity to do it. His interpretation is indeed quite plausible: Nabonidus and Belshazzar are the same person, Darius and Cyrus are relatives and the Daniel episode at Darius’ court is intended to take place in Media. The idea of the kinship and of the cooperation between the two kings is particularly important, because it is used also by Jerome and by the rabbinic sources.

### *Jerome*

In his *Commentariorum in Daniele libri III*, Jerome accepts that Belshazzar is the successor of Laborsoardech and the last king of Babylon, but he does not consider Belshazzar another name for

Nabopolassaros, Nabokolassaros, Illoaroudamos, Nerigasolassaros and Nabonadios (list based on the text published by Wachsmuth 1895, 304-306, who includes in his edition Syncellus’ versions).

55. The region called Kerman today, in south central Iran.

56. “A king of Elam will arise, the sceptre [...] He will remove him from his throne and [...] He will settle him in another land” (*Dynastic Prophecy* II, 20-22, edition and translation by Grayson 1975b).

57. The statement the Nabonidus and Belshazzar are the same person is found in the *Chronicle* by Bede (672-735), who depends on Josephus.

58. Seventeen are of course the years of Nabonidus’ reign.

59. Astyages is the Median king defeated by Cyrus. Herodotus considers Cyrus Astyages’ grandson (I, 107-108).

Nabonidus and he says that he was Labor-sordech's son. He declares that he depends on Josephus, but the Jewish historian never says that Labashi-Marduk was Belshazzar's father: this statement is surprising, because Jerome translated Eusebius' *Chronicle* (which depends on Berossus-Josephus) in which is clearly stated that Labesorakhus was a child and that he was killed by Nabonidus and other conspirators, without any mention of Belshazzar.

Moreover, in another version of the translation of the *Chronicle*, Jerome writes "Mortuo Nabuchodonosor Babyloniorum rege suscepit imperium Euilmarodach, cui successit frater eius Balthasar".<sup>60</sup>

Depending on Josephus, he considers Darius the Mede "Cyri regi Persarum auunculus" (V, 1). Commenting the end of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 4, he states that Babylon was taken by Darius and Cyrus together, but, unlike Josephus, he says that Belshazzar was killed ("captus atque iugulatus") and that Darius took the throne because he was older than Cyrus ("ordo aetatis et propinquitatis et regni": V, 30-31). Like Josephus, Jerome makes a fusion between Biblical and historical material and he tries to rationalize the inconsistencies of the Book of Daniel.

### *Syncellus*

George Syncellus, a Byzantine writer of late VIIIth, early IXth century, reports in his *Ecloga Chronographica* two different successions of the Neo-Babylonian kings, the first based on the *Astronomical Canon*, gathered, with marked variations, from Ptolemy, the second on the *Ecclesiastical Computation*. In the former he cites Nabopalasros, Naboukholassaros, "also known as Nebuchadnezzar", Illoaroudamos, Nirigasolasaros, Nabonadios, "also known as Astyages", in the latter Nabopalasros, Nabuchodonosor, Eucilad Marodach, Niriglesaros, "also known as Baltasar", Nabonadios "also known as Astyages, Dareios, son of Assueros, and Artaxerxes".<sup>61</sup>

The lists do not have mention of Labashi-Mardukh and the second presents the only case in which Belshazzar and Neriglissar are considered to be the same person. The attribution of different names to the same king, started by Josephus with Nabonidus and Belshazzar, is over-expanded by Syncellus, who clearly does not retain any historiographical memory of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty.

### **Rabbinic and Medieval Jewish testimonies**

In Jewish sources, we can detect two main attitudes regarding the story of Belshazzar.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, Rabbis put themselves in Josephus' tradition, trying to explain the historical inconsistencies

60. Fotheringham 1923, 178. The statement recurs in the *Chronicon Paschale* (VIIth century AD): see Sack 1982, 94-95.

61. See Adler – Tuffin 2002, 302-304.

62. The midrashic material on the Book of Daniel is scanty. However, there are *midrashim* — particularly on the Book of Esther — which contain some details connected to Belshazzar and Daniel.

of the book. On the other hand, the narration is increasingly affected by narrative details which can be associated to the influence of the novel and the folklore.

The Babylonian Talmud contains some references to Belshazzar, while Nabonidus is never mentioned: Evil-Merodakh is known from the Bible and he is cited in the Talmud as the successor of Nebuchadnezzar, while Neriglissar and Nabonidus are completely ignored. Belshazzar is supposed to be the Babylonian ruler after Nebuchadnezzar and Evil-Merodakh (*Megillah* 11b), and the same idea seems to be contained in the majority of the *midrashim*.<sup>63</sup>

The new significant element is that his wickedness is augmented by implicitly considering him the father of queen Vashti,<sup>64</sup> the chief wife of king Ahasuerus<sup>65</sup> before Esther<sup>66</sup> and thus creating a continuative tradition of iniquitous monarchs in the Babylonian dynasty. The *Esther Rabbah* accepts from the *Talmud* the idea, although not clearly expressed, that Belshazzar is the father of Vashti, who is put as fourth in the Neo-Babylonian dynasty,<sup>67</sup> the “bad man’s house”.<sup>68</sup> In other Jewish traditions, Vashti is plainly said to be Belshazzar’s daughter, and she runs to the apartments of her father Belshazzar on the night of the fall of Babylon to see what is going on. But her father is dead and she meets Darius, who gives her to his son Ahasuerus for wife.<sup>69</sup>

The succession of the three kings is maintained in the *Midrash Rabbah*, where seems to be implied the idea that Nebuchadnezzar is the father of Evil-Merodakh, and the latter the father of Belshazzar (e.g. *Genesis Rabbah* XLIV, 15; LXXXV, 2; *Song of Songs Rabbah* III 4, 2; *Esther Rabbah* III, 8). This tradition is attested also in the *Seder ‘Olam Rabbah*<sup>70</sup> and it is generally accepted in the Middle Ages,<sup>71</sup> e.g. by Rashi in his *Commentary to Jeremiah* (27, 7).

63. Almost all the testimonies agree in defining Belshazzar as “king”, but there is a curious exception constituted by an interesting and puzzling passage contained in the *Qoblet Rabbah*, where is stated that Belshazzar, סנטרא דבבל, was born in the day in which Gebini ben Harson, a very rich man, died (IV, 7). It is to my knowledge the only occurrence of Belshazzar as סנטרא and not as מלכא, “king”. The term סנטרא is usually translated as “governor”, but its main meaning is “guardsman”, “bailiff”, from the root נִטְר (\*NṬR), “to guard”.
64. “The wicked Vashti, the daughter of the son of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar” (*Megillah* 10b; see also Segal 1994, I, 74). For the tradition of Belshazzar as Vashti’s father see Ginzberg 1910-1938, VI, 455. This passage seems to imply, once again, that Belshazzar is the son of Nebuchadnezzar. However, 1 *Targum Esther* considers Vashti Evil-Merodach’s daughter (see Ginzberg 1910-1938, VI, 455).
65. The idea that Ahasuerus was the immediate successor of Cyrus is another invention of Jewish tradition (cf. Ezra 4; *Seder ‘Olam Rabbah*, 28). Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses in 530.
66. Esther 1: 9-22.
67. *Esther Rabbah*, Proem, 12: “It is written, I will cut off from Babylon name (שם) and remnant (שאר), and offshoot (גין) and offspring (נכד) (Isa XIV, 22). ‘Name’ refers to Nebuchadnezzar; ‘remnant’ refers to Evil-Merodach; ‘offshoot’ refers to Belshazzar and ‘offspring’ refers to Vashti”.
68. *Esther Rabbah* III, 1. See also Ginzberg 1910-1938, IV, 373, 375.
69. Ginzberg 1910-1938, IV, 373. Another tradition, attested in 2 *Targum Esther* 1. 1, 2 considers Ahasuerus son of Cyrus, son of Darius the Mede (see Ginzberg 1910-1938, VI, 453). Moreover, in the Tractate *Megillah*, Ahasuerus’ feast is depicted as close to Belshazzar’s, since both the kings base the removal and misuse of the temple vessels on a wrong calculation of the seventy years cited in Jeremiah’s prophecy (29, 10); see Segal 1994, I, 160-181. Segal calls this haggadic section of the tractate *Megillah* “Babylonian Esther Midrash”.
70. Chapter 28.
71. See Goldwurm 2002<sup>6</sup>, 156.

However, commentators are far from unanimous, and Rashi himself in his *Commentary to Daniel* (5, 1) thinks that Evil-Merodach and Belshazzar are both sons of Nebuchadnezzar. Another partial exception is constituted by the story reported by the so-called *Chronicles of Jerahme'el*,<sup>72</sup> in which it is stated that Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his younger son Nebuchadnezzar, and then by his elder son Evil-Merodakh. He has three sons, whose names — taken from Josephus, but heavily distorted — were ריגוסר דוך, לבוזר דוך, and נבאר “who was Belshazzar” (הוא בלשצר).<sup>73</sup>

As regards the problem of the succession of Belshazzar, Jewish tradition continues Josephus' attempt to identify Darius the Mede as Cyrus' ally. The idea of a cooperation between Media and Persia and a division of the Babylonian reign was quite widespread in Jewish tradition.<sup>74</sup> The alternation of Media and Persia was thought to be present in the word *peres* of the writing on the wall, interpreted by Daniel as “your kingdom is divided and given to Media and Persia” (5, 28), while in 6, 29, Daniel is said to be “successful in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian”. It is easy to understand why Jewish tradition tries to demonstrate that “there was some sort of coordination or rotation agreement between the two nations”.<sup>75</sup> This is clearly expressed in *Esther Rabbah*, where it is said “Sometimes Media is given precedence over Persia, and sometimes Persia is given precedence over Media. When the government is held by Media, Persia is subordinate to it; when the government is held by Persia, Media is subordinate to it” (III, 18).<sup>76</sup>

In order to make the alliance more plausible, Jewish authors adopt from Josephus a second idea, the idea of a kinship between Darius and Cyrus. Josephus speaks about general “kinship”: Cyrus is Darius' “relative” (συγγενής), while in Jerome Darius is Cyrus' “uncle” (*avunculus*). In later traditions, such as the so called *Sepher Josephon* or *Josippon*<sup>77</sup> (chapter 3), Cyrus is Darius' son-in-law: “Cyrus became Darius' kinsmen, having married his daughter” (ויחתן כורש בדריוש ויקח את בתו לו לאשה). When they have to divide the reign, Darius takes “Babylon, its settlements and the palace of the king” (בבל ואת בנוחיה ואת היכל המלך), Cyrus “all the reign of the Chaldeans, except for Babylon” (כול

72. Probably dated to the XIIth century, it is a “pseudo-historical” anthology, imbued with folkloristic and legendary elements (see Schwarzbaum 1971).

73. נבאר is given in the critical edition by Yassif (2001, 250), but Gaster's translation of the passage gives the name Nabar (נבאר), which is more likely for its closeness to Josephus.

74. For the traditions related to a cooperation between Media and Persia see Segal 1994, I, 193-198.

75. Segal 1994, I, 196. According to him, the idea of a rotation between Media and Persia tries to consider both the prediction of the division of the Babylonian reign and the succession of the two reigns.

76. Transl. Segal 1994, I, 195.

77. The so called *Josippon* is a narration of the Jewish history from the origins to the fall of the Second Temple, probably composed in Southern Italy in the Xth century (cf. in particular Flusser 1953). The critical text is established by Flusser 1978-1980. The text is highly fictional: the chapter on the fall of Babylon is preceded by one on the wars between Rome and Babylon. It is worth noticing that the above mentioned *Chronicles of Jerahme'el* depend on the *Josippon* for the narration of the fall of Babylon and other episodes related to Daniel (cf. Schwarzbaum 1971, 75-76). The fall of Babylon is contained in chapter 8, sub-chapter 7 in the critical edition of *Jerahme'el* by Yassif 2001, while it corresponds to chapters LXVII-LXVIII in the translation by Gaster 1899. Mark Lidzbarski, in his brilliant autobiography *Auf raubem Wege* (Gießen 1927), remembers the *Josippon* as one of the most interesting reading of his childhood (he was particularly impressed by an interpolated Hebrew version of the *Alexander Romance* by Pseudo-Callisthenes): the *Josippon* was one of the few non religious books owned by his parents.

לבבל (מלכות כשדים חוצה לבבל), but subsequently Darius nominates Cyrus as his successor on his deathbed, so that “Media and Persia came to be one monarchy” (ותהי הממלכה אחת למדי ופרס).

The *Josippon* is also significant for the second tendency of Jewish traditions towards the fall of Babylon: the expansion of the meagre Biblical narration by adding fictional details. This attitude was not limited to Jewish narrative, but it should be considered as part of the huge phenomenon which took place in the Mediterranean area: the rise of novel or, as Northrop Frye defined it, “secular literature”, mainly derived from folktales.<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, Daniel is in itself a Jewish *novella*, but the novelistic themes increase in the Greek additions and in Rabbinic and Medieval narrations.

*Josippon* mainly depends on Josephus, but it adds some significant details. Cyrus and Darius are kinsmen and they are allied in the war against Belshazzar, but they are said “to rebel” against him: “They joined with each other and they were faithless (ויפשו) to the king of the Chaldeans, and they rebelled (וימרדו) against Belshazzar the king”. This statement seems to imply that Cyrus and Darius were Belshazzar’s subordinates, even if they are called “kings”. We may add that in the *Midrash Panim ’Aberim B* Cyrus is said to have been “in the service of Nebuchadnezzar”<sup>79</sup> and that in the *Song of Songs Rabbah*<sup>80</sup> Cyrus and Darius are Belshazzar’s doorkeepers. The idea that they were “traitors” in marching against Belshazzar is quite interesting, because it immediately recalls Gobryas’ betrayal in the *Cyropaedia*. The war comes out uncertainly and it is to celebrate a battle won by his princes that Belshazzar organizes the feast in which he drinks from the Temple vessels.<sup>81</sup> In this text the author poses — and answers — the crucial question: *why* does Belshazzar organize a banquet during such a dramatic moment? This question came to mind to the first readers of Daniel, since the introduction to chapter 5 of the Old Greek text contains the statement that Belshazzar was inaugurating his palace (or his reign). It has been suggested that the presence of this detail in three testimonies (Daniel and related texts, Herodotus, Xenophon) can hardly be considered mere coincidence and that the festivities could have been those of the Ḥarran *akītu* festival.<sup>82</sup>

However, the plausibility of a feast held during a siege is highly disputable, and we can wonder if this element is just a *cliché* in the traditions about the Oriental courts. Huge banquets and great amounts of wine are often credited to Oriental (particularly Persian) kings both in the Bible and in Greek literature. The above-mentioned feast of Ahasuerus in the book of Esther<sup>83</sup> is probably the best known example, but we can cite also Holophernes’ feast in the deuterocanonical Book of

78. Frye 1976, 6-17. For this phenomenon in rabbinic literature see Kovelman 2005.

79. Ed. Buber 1886, 60-61. See also Ginzberg 1910-1938, VI, 431.

80. III, 4, 2.

81. The explanation is accepted by Rashi (*Commentary to Daniel* 5, 1), who cites the *Sepher Josephon* as his source. We may incidentally note that, according to *’Abba Gorion* 8, Ahasuerus celebrates his banquet after having crushed a revolt (see Ginzberg IV, 366 and VI, 452). A Karaite commentator, Jepheth ibn Ali (around 1000), thinks that the reason of Belshazzar’s feast is the celebration of the seventieth year of the kingdom.

82. According to the *Chronicle*, Babylon was taken on the 16th of Tašrītu; the *akītu* festival started on the 17th. See Beaulieu 1989, 226; Wolters 1995.

83. Both Josephus (*Antiquities* XI, 6, 1) and later Jewish traditions (see Ginzberg IV, 371-372) stress the fact that Persians at the banquets were forced to drink as much as they could, but Ahasuerus at his feast let them drink as they chose.

Judith. In the Greek authors there are statements about Persians' expensive meals<sup>84</sup> and intoxications.<sup>85</sup> In Latin literature, we can mention Curtius Rufus' assertion that Babylonians were given to hard drinking.<sup>86</sup> Wine is a crucial element in Belshazzar's feast: it is wine that induces him to ask for the Temple vessels<sup>87</sup> (the element is noticed and stressed in later testimonies),<sup>88</sup> as it is wine that induces Ahasuerus to force his wife to come in the presence of his nobles, and it is wine that allows Judith to murder Holophernes.

Moreover, taking advantage of the drunkenness of the adversary is a consummate stratagem in ancient literary conventions. In the Bible, the main example is Holophernes' slain by Judith, but we can mention also the assassination of Amnon by Absalom's servants (2 Sam 13, 28) and that of Elah by his official Zimri (1Kg 16, 9-10). As an example of the consequences of inebriation, we can cite Ahasuerus' banquet, but also Noah's nakedness (Gn 9, 21) and the episode of Lot and his daughters (Gn 19, 31-36).<sup>89</sup> In Greek literature, the topic is used by Herodotus in Cyrus' victory upon the Massagetae (I, 211). There are some examples of banquets degenerating in altercations (e.g. the battle between Lapithes and Centaurs; the battle between Dioskouroi and the sons of Aphareus) or at least in violent acts — such as Gadatas' castration by the Assyrian king in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (V, 2, 28). Gadatas is castrated by the Assyrian king during a banquet because he is appreciated by a royal concubine. As noticed by Levine Gera, there are two more examples of a king's outbreak of jealousy during a feast, one in Esther and one in Herodotus.<sup>90</sup>

Indeed, as Adele Berlin points out: "It turns out that the all stories with a Persian setting [...] are bound to contain similar motifs. When Esther agrees with the classical authors, it is not because of historical accuracy [...], but because Esther employs the literary conventions of its day".<sup>91</sup> Among the similar motifs, she cites "wealth and luxury, and the pride the king takes in his wealth, heavy eating and drinking, and drinking from goblets of glass and gold".<sup>92</sup> As we can see, almost all these

84. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, IV, 146.

85. *Ibid.*, IV, 144.

86. "Convivales ludi tota Perside regibus purpuratisque cordi sunt, Babylonii maxime in vinum quae ebrietatem sequuntur effusi sunt" (V, I).

87. חמרא טעם is usually interpreted as "under the influence of wine". However, the word טעם means both "taste" and "command, advice", and some scholars prefer to translate the passage as "at the tasting of wine". See Meadowcroft 1995, 58-60.

88. See e.g. Old Greek Preface, Talmud (*Megillah* 12b), *Josippon*, Jerome, Rashi. The text which particularly stresses the importance of wine is that by Saadiah Gaon, whose commentary starts with the assertion: "The first thing that we have to consider in this story is not to drink to the point that alcohol overcomes our judgment" (transl. by Alobaidi 2006). He cites many biblical passages on the consequences of hard drinking and he states, mentioning the Talmud, that drunkenness is never an excuse in Jewish jurisprudence. We may incidentally note that in Jennens' *libretto* Belshazzar is presented as quite prone to drinking and his last words are: "I thank thee, Sesach: thy sweet pow'r/ Does to myself myself restore./ Thy plenteous heart-inspiring juice/ All my courage lost renews./ I blush to think I shadows fear'd —/ Cyrus, come on! I'm now prepar'd".

89. For wine and intoxication in the Bible see Sasson 1994.

90. Levine Gera, 251-252. In Esther 7: 7-10, Haman is sentenced to death because he comes too close to Esther. In Herodotus IX, 110-112, Xerxes hands over Masistes' wife to his own jealous wife Amestris.

91. Berlin 2001, 9.

92. Berlin 2001, 10.

elements can be suitable to the representation of Belshazzar's court as it is depicted in Daniel 5 (or Ahasuerus' court in Esther) and it seems likely that these descriptions should be considered not historical, but conventionally shaped.

Among other details, Berlin cites also eunuchs. They are not mentioned in Daniel, but it is significant that in the *Sepher Josephon* the narration of Belshazzar's murder is given in quite a detailed way and it has as the main character an eunuch. During the night, an eunuch in the Babylonian court since Nebuchadnezzar's time, trusts Daniel's interpretation of the inscription, kills Belshazzar while he is sleeping and flees with his detached head to Cyrus and Darius, to gain their benevolence.<sup>93</sup>

The betrayal of an eunuch is a well known topic in Greek literature: the main example is constituted, of course, by Ctesias' *Persica*, where eunuchs are central figures, often said to be conspiring against their masters,<sup>94</sup> but another eunuch, even if a particular one, is the above-mentioned Gadatas, who helps Gobryas in killing the Assyrian king during the conquest of Babylon. Once again, we can face a "wandering" detail, which can be better explained by a common literary universe than by historical accuracy.

The slaying of Belshazzar, just mentioned by the Bible, was destined to be expanded by later authors with a certain amount of freedom, because of its original vagueness.

In the *Song of Songs Rabbah*, Cyrus and Darius are said to be princes and doorkeepers in Belshazzar's palace. Scared by the mysterious inscription, Belshazzar, before retiring in his room, orders his guardians to kill whoever presents himself in that night, even if he pretends to be the king himself. But during the night the king goes to his privy and, when he wants to re-enter the palace, saying that he is the king, his doorkeepers kill him breaking his head with a candlestick (III 4, 2). In the same chapter, Cyrus persuades Darius to take the throne, fulfilling Daniel's interpretation of the writing on the wall. A similar discussion on the priority of Darius in taking the throne is found in the *Panim 'Aherim*,<sup>95</sup> where it is also mentioned a candelabrum. It is narrated that Belshazzar was killed by a candlestick falling on his head:<sup>96</sup> "Says Rav: On that night when Belshazzar was assassinated, and they placed Darius to the throne, when the candelabrum fell and crushed Belshazzar's brain — Cyrus and Darius were reclining there".<sup>97</sup>

The particular of the candlestick is puzzling, but it could remind of the candelabrum (נברשתא)<sup>98</sup> cited in Dan 5, 4-5: "At that moment, the fingers of a man's hand came forth and wrote opposite

93. Josephon's version of Belshazzar's death was accepted by the so-called "Pseudo-Saadia". This commentary, attributed to Saadia Gaon and printed with the biblical text in the traditional Jewish Bible, is probably by Saadia ben Nahmani (XIIth century): see Montgomery 1927, 106; Collins 1993, 86 (note 100); Goldwurm 2002<sup>6</sup>, 345-346.

94. Levine Gera, 203-204.

95. Ed. Buber 1886, 60-61.

96. Another reading is close to the *Song of Songs Rabbah*: see Ginzberg 1910-1938, 431.

97. Transl. Segal 2001, I, 197.

98. It is disputed if the word is Semitic (from root BRR, "to be clear, bright": see Montgomery 1927, 255) or a loan from Old Persian (see Rosenthal 1963, 59). The translation is discussed in the Jewish commentaries: many of them consider it the equivalent of Hebrew *menorah* (e.g. Rashi and Saadia Gaon), while Pseudo-Saadia cites the interpretations "lantern" and "window" (in the second case, the banquet should be intended as taking place during the day).

the candelabrum on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace and the king saw a palm of a hand that was writing". The candelabrum makes the inscription visible to all the spectators and, in falling on Belshazzar, is seems to be a divine instrument for a second time.

As regard the "author" of the writing on the wall, the text of Daniel is effective in describing a floating hand, and the image is maintained in Josephus. However, later writers tend to "rationalize" the hand and "introduce more tangible expressions of God's involvement in the outcome of the events".<sup>99</sup> In the story of Esther contained in *Megillab* and in other *midrashim*, the presence of angels is constant, while in the Bible neither God nor angels are even mentioned.<sup>100</sup> It is interesting to notice that a very active "manipulator" of the events in the *Megillab* is Gabriel,<sup>101</sup> who, among other actions, rewrites the royal chronicles mentioning Mordechai's service (12b). No wonder, then, that Pseudo-Saadia in his commentary thinks that the hand was that of Gabriel and that some authors imagine him a divine messenger. According to the *Sepher Josephbon*, God "sent a scribe from his throne" (וישלה מעם כסאו הספר) to write the inscription, even if "the king saw the fingers writing, but he could not see the rest of the body"<sup>102</sup> (וירא המלך את האצבעות כותבות ושאר הגולם לא ראה). This celestial "scribe" is likely to be an angel, as Rashi's "man from the heavens" (אדם מן השמים), while Saadia Gaon is explicit in calling him "angel" (מלאך).

The mention of angels as divine instruments is widespread both in Jewish and Christian narrations. From the third century, the star (ἀστὴρ) which conducts the Oriental *Magoi* to Bethlehem in Matthew's Gospel (chapter 2) was interpreted as an angel by many commentators.<sup>103</sup> Curiously enough, the late western traditions about the *Magoi* mention Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar as their names<sup>104</sup> and Marsilius Ficinus consider them the heirs of the Chaldaean sages, used to interpret signs.<sup>105</sup> It is quite tempting to suppose that the name of Belshazzar, the last Chaldaean Prince of Babylon, was preserved through the Chaldaean king of Daniel — not particularly able in deciphering symbols — and finally "inherited", at least in late traditions, by one of the most famous participants to the scene of the Nativity.<sup>106</sup>

99. Segal 2001, III, 254.

100. See Kovelman 2005, 52.

101. Cf. Segal 2001, III, 255-256.

102. I translate with "body" the word גולם, which properly means "formless mass".

103. See Cardini 2000, 46-47. The interpretation of the star as an angel is reported also in the *Legenda Aurea* by Iacopo da Varazze (XIV, 5).

104. Matthew just mentions some "Magoi from the East" (μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν), without their names nor their number. The first mention of their names in the forms Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar is in the *Liber pontificalis* by Agnellus, bishop of Ravenna in the IXth century (see Cardini 2000, 37).

105. In his *Predicationes (De stella Magorum)*.

106. See also Cardini, who considers the name of the *magos* similar to that of the king in Daniel, connected to the *magoi* "sia perché consulta maghi e caldei, sia perché alla sua morte gli succede Ciro, signore appunto del paese dei magi". Cardini erroneously believes that the historical Belshazzar is the son of a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar (2000, 39).

## Conclusions

“Händel, once so crowded, plays to empty walls in that opera house, where there used to be a constant audience as long as there were any dancers to be seen. Unfashionable that I am, I was, I own, highly delighted the other night at his last oratorio”. This letter was sent on April 2nd, 1745, by Elizabeth Carter to her friend Catherine Talbot:<sup>107</sup> the opera house is the King Theatre, the oratorio, of course, *Belshazzar*, performed for the first time on March 27th.

It is not surprising that *Belshazzar* did not interest the public. A first reason is that the performance was probably not faultless, since Händel was obliged to redistribute the parts — and to transpose some music — for the last minute absence of Mrs Cibber (Daniel). A second reason is that the oratorio “was probably well above the heads of most of the audience”.<sup>108</sup> This is true not only for the music, but also for Jennens’ *libretto*, which is dramatic, well-constructed and learned, but quite difficult and imbued with social, philosophical and political observations. It has been suggested that Jennens, devoted both to Protestantism and to the deposed house of Stuart,<sup>109</sup> used Händel’s oratorios to assert his views: in the case of *Belshazzar*, Cyrus is the representation of the ideal Patriot King — not surprisingly, since Xenophon’s Cyrus was a favourite model of good king in the seventeenth century.<sup>110</sup>

As a logical consequence, Belshazzar is presented in not a favourable way. He has been depicted as feeble and irresponsible since the narration of the Bible, and we can say that he is never “interesting”, neither in the book of Daniel nor in late traditions. The assertion of Young about Jennens’ Belshazzar “[...] he is only the traditional biblical lawbreaker, for his role is nothing but to be destroyed”<sup>111</sup> can be considered Belshazzar’s epitaph in almost all the testimonies we have. The only author who attributes him a strong personality, even if cruel and jealous, is Xenophon — but his “Assyrian” king has not a name.

From the administrative and historical Akkadian texts it is hard to understand Belshazzar’s personality, but he definitely does not seem to be irresponsible and inactive. Indeed in the two main monographs devoted to Nabonidus, he is presented as a key-figure in the reign of his father: Dougherty considers Belshazzar “energetic and influential” and states that he “almost equalled Nabonidus’ position and prestige”,<sup>112</sup> while Beaulieu goes even further and regards him as the real planner of the intrigue that led to Labashi-Marduk’s assassination.<sup>113</sup>

107. The letter is quoted in Young 1949, 140, and in Dean 1959, 455.

108. Dean 1959, 455.

109. Charles Jennens (1700-1773) was Nonjuror. The Catholic faith of James II caused a conflict in many squires between their loyalty to the Stuart house and the loyalty to Protestantism. When the Protestant succession was established, Nonjurors refused to abjure their loyalty to the Stuarts. It does not seem that Jennens was particularly active in the movement. However, Jennens’ close friend Edward Holsworth was probably an agent of the Pretender, and Jennens had many relationships with Jacobites (see Smith 1995, 190-192).

110. Smith 1995, 34 and 317-319. It is worth noticing that the Young Pretender, Frederick Prince of Wales, who identified himself with the Patriot King, owned a copy of *Belshazzar* (Smith 1995, 318).

111. Young 1949, 431. Moreover, Belshazzar is presented in B flat, “the key of Händelian braggarts” (Dean 1959, 442).

112. Dougherty 1929, 185-186.

113. Beaulieu 1989, 90-104.

It is certain that Belshazzar was entrusted with important responsibilities and he was probably well known by his father's subjects, the best proof being the preservation of his name in the Jewish traditions about the fall of Babylon. His name is likely to be the only thing "historically" preserved, even if it seems to be detectable the elaborate memory of some other detail, for instance the idea of a turn over/co-regency on the Babylonian throne. As in the other "Jewish novellas", the historicity of the name of one of the protagonists just grant the biblical setting of the story, familiar to its public. And as in the other "Jewish novellas", the jarring notes in the narration alert the audience about its fictional nature.

Moreover, the author of Daniel did not need an attractive and vigorous character, since Belshazzar's role was "nothing but to be destroyed". He is the only king in the book of Daniel to meet a sudden, violent death, and this happens because he is not able to learn from his father's fate. Probably to justify the fact that the Neo-Babylonian Empire did not end with the destroyer of Jerusalem, the idea of his final repentance was launched. Nebuchadnezzar himself became the paradigm of the monarch punished and redeemed by the power of God. His (supposed) wickedness was transferred to his (supposed) son Belshazzar, who became a paradigm for the iniquitous monarch; on the other hand, Cyrus — present in the Greek texts but not in Daniel and re-introduced in the Jewish historiographic works by Josephus — became the model of the wise monarch up to the Enlightenment.

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