

The Identifications of Darius the Mede

Steven D. Anderson, Ph.D. | October 7, 2020

The biblical book of Daniel describes a king called “Darius the Mede,” the son of Ahasuerus, who assumed rule over the Neo-Babylonian Empire after the fall of Babylon to a Medo-Persian force ([Daniel 5:31](#)). Darius the Mede is a major character in [Daniel 6](#), and the vision of [Daniel 9](#) is said to have occurred during his reign. However, a problem arises when trying to identify Darius the Mede in ancient extrabiblical literature. Based on extrabiblical sources, the conventional view of modern historians is that Cyrus the Persian conquered Media ca. 553 BC and deposed the last Median king. According to this version of history, Cyrus, as king of Persia, reigned as supreme ruler of the entire (Medo-)Persian Empire when Babylon fell in 539 BC.

Scholars have answered the problem of identifying Darius the Mede in extrabiblical sources in the seven ways described below.

Darius the Mede as fiction

Statement of view: This view denies the historical existence of Darius the Mede and the historicity of the book of Daniel.

Proponents: This has been the standard view among critical scholars since the latter part of the nineteenth century, although there are a few critical scholars who follow one of the historical identifications of Darius the Mede. Examples of proponents of Darius the Mede as fiction include [Driver](#), [Rowley](#), and [Grabbe](#).

Rationale: This view has two types of motives, historical and theological. The historical motive is that there are extrabiblical sources that tell a version of the history of Cyrus that does not recognize the existence of Darius the Mede. The

main extrabiblical source that the critics follow in the matter of Darius the Mede is the Greek historian Herodotus. Various cuneiform texts are cited as confirmation of Herodotus. Most critics simply assert that these sources prove the nonexistence of Darius the Mede without addressing the identifications of Darius the Mede proposed by other scholars. Basically, the critics dismiss the book of Daniel as a historical source. This is due to theological motives: the critics wish to prove that the book of Daniel is not the Word of God, but is basically a work of fiction. Thus, every time extrabiblical sources appear to contradict statements in the book of Daniel, the critics put their trust in these extrabiblical sources and deny what the book of Daniel says.

Objection #1: This view has theological motives, and for this reason does not treat the book of Daniel impartially, but rather seeks to refute it. The motives and presuppositions of the critics determine their conclusions.

Objection #2: This view does not analyze Herodotus and other ancient sources in a sufficiently critical manner, recognizing the prejudices and the contradictions in these sources.

Objection #3: This view must deny not only the historicity of the book of Daniel, but also various significant extrabiblical sources that appear to agree with the book of Daniel.

Objection #4: This view does not recognize the possibility of a coregency between Cyrus and Darius the Mede, which would allow for the reign of Darius the Mede during the reign of Cyrus.

Objection #5: This view cannot be accepted by someone who believes the Bible, since it explicitly contradicts affirmations made in the book of Daniel.

Darius the Mede as Gubaru

Statement of view: This view identifies Darius the Mede with “Gubaru” and/or “Ugbaru,” a governor of Gutium who was allied with Cyrus and was named governor of Babylonia by Cyrus.

Proponents: The majority of evangelical scholars writing in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century followed this theory. The classic statement of this view was given by [Whitcomb](#). [Shea](#) modified this view in response to problems found with its classic formulation.

Rationale: This theory was created after the discovery of cuneiform texts that were considered a validation of Herodotus' version of the Cyrus story. In their search for a figure in this version of the story who could correspond to Darius the Mede, many evangelical scholars identified Darius with Gubaru (also called Ugbaru and Gobryas). This man is mentioned by [Xenophon](#), the [Nabonidus Chronicle](#), and Babylonian contract texts. He was appointed governor of Babylon by Cyrus, and because of his high position Gubaru was identified with Darius the Mede. This theory is partly based on the identification of "the realm of the Chaldeans" ([Daniel 9:1](#), KJV) with the land of the Chaldeans, although in reality the realm (kingdom) of the Chaldeans encompassed a much larger territory than just Babylonia.

Whitcomb's theory and its problem: Whitcomb argued that Gubaru was a different person than Ugbaru, because the Nabonidus Chronicle says that Ugbaru died three weeks after the fall of Babylon. As for Gubaru, Babylonian contract texts dated from the fourth year of Cyrus until the fifth year of Cambyses mention Gubaru as governor of Babylonia. Whitcomb identified Darius the Mede with this governor named "Gubaru." The problem is that Whitcomb assumed that Gubaru had also been governor during the initial years of Cyrus' reign. However, contract texts name a different person as governor of Babylon during those years, and that person was the same Babylonian governor who had been governor before the fall of Babylon. Thus, Whitcomb's Gubaru cannot be the man who "received the kingdom" immediately after the fall of Babylon ([Daniel 5:31](#)).

Shea's theory and its problem: Shea argues that the person called "Ugbaru" in the Nabonidus Chronicle is the same person whom the Chronicle calls "Gubaru," and Shea identifies Darius the Mede with this person. However, the data from the Chronicle leads to the conclusion that Gubaru could not have held a position of power for more than a week after the fall of Babylon. This is because Cyrus entered Babylon two weeks after the fall of the city, and Shea supposed that Cyrus named Gubaru governor at that time; however, Gubaru died eight days later. Shea tries to argue that all the events of [Daniel 6](#) and [9](#)

could have transpired in only one week, but this is a very difficult argument to make.

General objection #1: There is no evidence that Gubaru was named “Darius.”

General objection #2: There is no evidence that the father of Gubaru was named “Ahasuerus” (a royal name).

General objection #3: The man called “Gobryas” by Xenophon clearly corresponds to the man called “Gubaru” and “Ugbaru” in the Nabonidus Chronicle, and [Xenophon](#) says that this man was an “Assyrian,” that is, a native of Babylonia. It is not possible to affirm that Gubaru was a Mede without contradicting Xenophon.

General objection #4: There is no extrabiblical source that describes Gubaru as a “king.” Although [Daniel 6:1-7](#) uses two words for “governor” ([פחה](#) and [אחשדרפן](#)) multiple times, these words are never applied to Darius the Mede. Instead, the book of Daniel applies the term “king” to Darius the Mede thirty times, and in [Daniel 6:25-27](#) Darius issues a decree to the whole world. It is hard to see how Darius the Mede could have been a mere local governor.

General objection #5: In [Daniel 6:7-9](#), Darius the Mede issues a decree which forbids anyone from presenting a petition to any God or man except himself. Such a decree could only have been issued by the highest regent in the realm, and not by a governor. This is confirmed by [Daniel 6:8, 12, 15](#), which say that no one in the kingdom could annul a decree issued by Darius the Mede. Thus, the book of Daniel itself contradicts all theories which identify Darius the Mede with a local governor.

Darius the Mede as Cyrus

Statement of view: This view identifies Darius the Mede with Cyrus, the Persian king.

Proponents: This theory was popular with evangelical scholars writing in the last part of the twentieth century, beginning with [Wiseman](#) in 1965.

Rationale: This view is able to accept the conventional version of the Cyrus story and still affirm the historicity of Darius the Mede. It has the advantage of identifying Darius with someone who indisputably held the title of “king” after the fall of Babylon. According to this theory, [Daniel 6:28](#) should be translated, “So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius, that is, during the reign of Cyrus the Persian” (cf. [1 Chr 5:26](#)). Cyrus’ mother was the daughter of the Median king Astyages, and thus Cyrus could be called either a “Mede” or a “Persian.”

Objection #1: The book of Daniel always distinguishes between “Cyrus the Persian” and “Darius the Mede.” There is no good explanation for the use of these two names and descriptions in the book of Daniel if both refer to the same person.

Objection #2: In his inscriptions, Cyrus always identifies himself as a Persian, not as a Mede.

Objection #3: There is no extrabiblical evidence that Cyrus was called “Darius” or that his father (Cambyses I) was called “Ahasuerus.”

Objection #4: [Herodotus](#), [Xenophon](#), and a [cylinder of Nabonidus](#) make statements which indicate that Cyrus was less than 62 years old when he conquered Babylon, which does not fit with the description of Darius the Mede in [Daniel 5:31](#).

Objection #5: This view accepts the conventional history of Cyrus unquestioningly—that is, it only follows the history of Herodotus and sources that appear to agree with Herodotus. It does not consider the possibility that the other extrabiblical sources that tell a different story might be correct.

Darius the Mede as historical, but of uncertain identity

Statement of view: This view affirms that Darius the Mede was a person who had a real historical existence, but it is not possible to know who he was in extrabiblical sources.

Proponents: This was the opinion of [E. B. Pusey](#) in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the majority of evangelical commentators adopted this point of view.

Rationale: This view recognizes problems with the identification of Darius the Mede with Gubaru/Ugbaru, as well as the identification of Darius the Mede with Cyrus, but it nevertheless upholds the inspiration and authority of the book of Daniel. Commentators who did not know which theory might be the correct one, but who nevertheless were convinced of the trustworthiness of the book of Daniel, adopted this view.

Objection: This view might be legitimate in some cases, but in others it can betray an attitude of indifference with respect to alleged historical difficulties in the Bible.

Darius the Mede as Cambyses II

Statement of view: This view identifies Darius the Mede with Cambyses II, the son and successor of Cyrus.

Proponent: There is only one scholar who has proposed this theory, [Charles Boutflower](#).

Rationale: There are cuneiform texts that describe Cambyses II as Cyrus' coregent during the first year after fall of Babylon. Since Cambyses was given the title of "king," he could fulfill the role of the King Darius who received the Neo-Babylonian kingdom after the fall of Babylon ([Daniel 5:31](#)).

Objection #1: The names do not match. That is, there is no evidence that Cambyses was called "Darius," or that his father Cyrus was called "Ahasuerus."

Objection #2: Although Cyrus' mother was a Mede, Cambyses and his father are always called Persians, not Medes, in extrabiblical sources.

Objection #3: Cambyses could not have issued the decrees of [Daniel 6:7-9](#) and [6:25-27](#) while his father was the supreme ruler.

Objection #4: Cambyses was less than 62 years old when Babylon fell, which does not match the description of Darius the Mede in [Daniel 5:31](#). Boutflower suggests that the original Aramaic text of this verse was altered, but there is no manuscript evidence to support this suggestion.

Darius the Mede as Astyages

Statement of view: This view identifies Darius the Mede with Astyages, the maternal grandfather of Cyrus.

Proponents: Only a few scholars have proposed this theory, including [John Lightfoot](#), [Westcott](#), and [Alfrink](#). It is also reflected in the first verse of the apocryphal book [Bel and the Dragon](#).

Rationale: Herodotus states that Astyages [was the last Median king](#) and [had no son](#). If one accepts this claim, then it is natural to try to identify Darius the Mede with Astyages. Herodotus says that Cyrus deposed Astyages, [but did not kill him](#). It can be hypothesized that Astyages was restored to kingship by Cyrus when Cyrus made his son Cambyses his coregent. In this scenario, Astyages would have been made the third coregent in order to be Cambyses' tutor, and he could have been given the throne name "Darius."

Objection #1: This view contradicts Xenophon, [who affirms](#) that Astyages died before Cyrus began his campaigns of conquest. Xenophon further affirms that Astyages was succeeded by a son named Cyaxares, who reigned as coregent with Cyrus. The sources which support Xenophon are also evidence against the identification of Darius the Mede with Astyages.

Objection #2: The suppositions made by this viewpoint are very speculative, given that none of the ancient sources says anything about the restoration of Astyages to his throne.

Darius the Mede as Cyaxares II

Statement of view: This view identifies Darius the Mede with Cyaxares II, the son and successor of Astyages according to the Greek historian Xenophon.

Proponents: This was the view of the majority of Jewish and Christian scholars from [Josephus](#) and [Jerome](#) until [Keil](#) in the 1870s, but it was abandoned after the discovery of cuneiform texts that appeared to support Herodotus' account of the accession of Cyrus, which does not allow for the existence of the Cyaxares II described by Xenophon. Nevertheless, the description of Cyaxares II in the *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon fits well with the description of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel. Given that the identifications of Darius the Mede that are based on Herodotus' version of the history have many problems, the identification of Darius the Mede with Cyaxares II has returned to the attention of Bible scholars. I (Steven Anderson) wrote my doctoral dissertation (2014; [pdf](#), [pdf](#), [print book](#)) on the subject of Darius the Mede, advocating for the identification of Darius the Mede with Cyaxares II. Some evangelical scholars, such as [Kirk MacGregor](#) and [Paul Tanner](#), have subsequently followed my arguments.

Rationale: Xenophon describes Cyaxares II as the last Median king and the uncle of Cyrus. According to Xenophon, Cyaxares II was king of Media and Cyrus was king of Persia, and the two were allied in a single confederated government. This power-sharing arrangement offers a way to harmonize biblical texts (e.g., [Isaiah 45:1-3](#)) and extrabiblical texts which describe Cyrus as the conqueror of kingdoms with the book of Daniel's affirmation that there was a king higher than Cyrus when Babylon fell. According to Xenophon, Cyaxares II lived for two years after the fall of Babylon, which is enough time for the events of [Daniel 6](#). Since Cyaxares had no male heir and Cyrus [had married his daughter](#), Cyrus inherited Cyaxares' position after his death and united the kingdoms of Media and Persia in a single throne. Although Xenophon only uses the name "Cyaxares," there is evidence from other sources that Cyaxares took the throne name "Darius." There is also evidence that Cyaxares' father, called "Astyages" by the Greek historians, took the throne name "Ahasuerus" (= Xerxes). Xenophon does not give a precise age for Cyaxares, but his affirmation that Cyaxares [was older](#) than Cyrus fits with the affirmation in [Daniel 5:31](#) that Darius the Mede was 62 years old when

Babylon fell. In summary, the Cyaxares of Xenophon corresponds very closely to the description of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel. In my dissertation, I undertook a detailed study of other extrabiblical sources that provide information regarding the issue of Cyrus and Darius the Mede, and I found strong evidence in support of the existence of Cyaxares II/Darius the Mede.

Objection #1: Babylonian contract texts are dated to the reign of Cyrus from the fall of Babylon, without an intervening reign of Darius the Mede.

Response: The contract texts also do not mention Belshazzar, whom Daniel identifies correctly as “king.” This is because the contract texts do not always mention all the coregents in a coregency. In the case of the coregency between Cyrus and Darius the Mede, it was natural to date Babylonian contract texts by the reign of the king who entered Babylon as its conqueror (Cyrus). Nevertheless, it is possible that there are contract texts dated by the reign of Darius the Mede, since those texts would be identified by modern scholars with the reign of one of the three Dariuses who reigned later.

Objection #2: The *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon is not a reliable source for the history of Cyrus.

Response: This evaluation of the *Cyropaedia* is based on the presupposition that Cyaxares II is fictional. If one accepts the historicity of Cyaxares II, then the *Cyropaedia* appears much more reliable. Moreover, Xenophon has been proven more precise than Herodotus with respect to his description of the royal upbringing of Cyrus, the existence of Belshazzar, the existence of Gobryas, and the marriage of Cyrus with Cyaxares’ daughter.

To read more details regarding the identification of Darius the Mede with Cyaxares II and the ancient sources which support this identification, see my article: [Darius the Mede: A Solution to His Identity](#).

Copyright © 2020 by Steven D. Anderson.

Dr. Steven D. Anderson received his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies with a concentration in Bible Exposition from Dallas Theological Seminary (Dallas, TX).