



Answer Sheet

Activity One: Nabonidus Chronicle

Pros/things we can learn

- Initial version written close to the time of the events described, so written at a time when knowledge of the events were current, suggesting that they should be recorded accurately.
- Written by the priesthood, the scholarly elite of the city – that is people who were in a position to know precisely what had happened.
- Written with the intention of providing a record of events and did not have a public propaganda function – little reason, therefore, to make things up.
- Give good information about some of the major world events e.g. Cyrus' defeat of Astyages, the Median king, and also give some detail about how Cyrus was able to win the battle ('the army of Astyages revolted against him'). This allows us to date some major events which are mentioned in other sources (e.g. Greek literature) but which are not dated – we are able to get a sense of the rise of the Persian Empire.
- Get a sense of the major political issues of the day i.e. what the king was up to.
- Reveals the importance of correct religious observance (e.g. regular comments on whether religious ceremonies were carried out correctly).

Cons/things we can't learn

- Focuses almost exclusively on the religious sphere and on major political events (hardly surprising given that the chronicle was produced by priests). This means we get little sense of everyday life in Babylon – it is also impossible to determine how seriously normal Babylonians took issues of religious compliance because we would expect the priests to comment upon the extent to which rituals were carried out correctly.
- Very much focused on the city of Babylon. The Persians get a mention, but we hear nothing of other events outside of the city.
- Very little explanation of events – the chronicle records what happened, but it makes no attempt to explain, for instance, why the King stayed at Tema for so long. When contemporary voices are silent on the causes of key events, or the motivation of the principal actors, it is almost impossible to reconstruct these things 2500 years later. In that sense, the chronicles are good for helping us to learn *what* happened, but not very helpful in working out *why*.

Activity Two: Cyrus Cylinder

Pros/things we can learn

- Written at the time of the events described and so should be accurate
- Written for public consumption – although that means that the Cylinder has a propagandistic function (and so we should be wary of trusting it completely), the people reading the text (or, more likely, hearing the text being read aloud) knew exactly what had happened so, if events were described inaccurately, Cyrus would lose all credibility and they would not trust his messages. In order for the public to



believe some of the important bits (e.g. that Cyrus has the support of the local gods), he has to build his credibility by getting the basics right.

- A very clear example of how Cyrus presented himself to the newly-conquered Babylonians, which enables us to study Cyrus' public self-presentation. We get a sense, for instance, of how Cyrus wanted his conquest to be understood – rather than force of arms, he emphasises the way he entered Babylon without a fight and with the main god of the city by his side.
- Revealing about Cyrus' approach to ruling Babylon – he wanted to embed himself within the cultural traditions of the city (i.e. that he reveres the gods of Babylon); he did not want to be seen to rule purely by force.

Cons/things we can't learn

- Has a very obvious propagandistic function, designed to win Cyrus the support of the Babylonians. Consequently, we must be careful about accepting some of the central messages of the text e.g. that Nabonidus did not respect the gods of Babylon, or that Cyrus' conquest was not resisted at all.
- Obviously, we cannot tell from this document how Cyrus's message was received by the Babylonians and, for all the Babylonians allegedly supported him, we have no idea how far this corresponds with reality.
- Deals purely in the world of representation and not in actuality – the Cyrus Cylinder is the world according to Cyrus and nothing more.

Activity 3: The Verse Account

Pros/Things we can learn

- Reveals that attempts to blacken Nabonidus' memory were more widespread than the obvious propaganda in Cyrus' own name
- Suggests some explanations as to why Nabonidus had left Babylon. As with the Cyrus Cylinder, for all that the source is clearly biased, small details must reflect the general understanding of events in Babylon shortly after 539 for the text as a whole to have any credibility. Consequently, it confirms, for instance, that Nabonidus was away from Babylon for a long period of time. Some of the little details are confirmed in other sources, as the introductory preamble on the website explains.

Cons/Things we can't learn

- Written under Cyrus, this is obvious pro-Persian propaganda and the treatment of Cyrus/Nabonidus is consequently suspect.
- We don't know the provenance (that is to say the who/why/when) of the text, so we can't assess the reliability of some of the claims. We have no way of knowing, for instance, whether the author was in a position to know anything about Nabonidus' activities outside of Babylon.

Activity 4: The Book of Daniel

Pros/Things we can learn

- Gives an idea of how the Babylonian court was received and understood in Jewish culture; whereas the Babylonian inscriptions give a sense of how the world was



perceived by the Babylonian elite (and how the Babylonians thought of themselves), this text gives an insight into how the Babylonians were perceived by others.

- Gives some idea of how royal banquets were imagined

Cons/Things we can't learn

- We don't know who wrote the text (or indeed whether there was just one author) or when it was originally composed – the text as we have it is from the second century BC, long after the events it describes and this casts doubt upon its reliability. Consequently, we have no idea as to whether the person had any information about the Babylonian court or was just imagining it.
- If the original was composed around the time of the events described, then how was it passed down? Stories are transmitted orally in a number of cultures, but oral tales are prone to change in the telling.
- The theme of prophecy obviously plays a crucial role in the Bible (as well as a number of other religious texts), the point being to demonstrate the power of the true god (in this case YAHWEH). Consequently, the story as told is incredulous (unless we believe in miracles).
- It was recorded for an audience who were unfamiliar with Babylon and would not have known many of the important facts. Consequently, the audience are unlikely to have known little details about the Babylonian world and so the story does not lose credibility if it gets those details wrong.
- There are some obvious factual inaccuracies e.g. the Persian king who conquered Babylon was Cyrus, not Darius, and Belshazzar's father was Nabonidus, not the famous Nebuchadnezzar. This casts doubt on the plausibility of other details.

Activity 5: Overview

1. Who was the last king of Babylon?

There are two possible answers to this question based on the sources. The Book of Daniel suggests that the king was called Belshazzar, but the cuneiform records calls him Nabonidus. The information from the cuneiform sources should be accepted for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Nabonidus Chronicle was probably written at the time (even though the surviving document was a copy made after the Persian conquest) and refers to Nabonidus as king, even though he was not in Babylon for much of his reign. Secondly, Nabonidus is described as king in the Cyrus Cylinder. This propagandistic document was produced shortly after Cyrus conquered Babylon and was designed to ingratiate Cyrus with the Babylonian population by suggesting that he was a favourite of Marduk, the chief Babylonian god. In order to sell this 'big lie', however, Cyrus needed to establish his authority by getting little details right. If Cyrus had gotten the name of the king – obviously a well-known fact at the time – wrong, he would have looked stupid, his credibility would have been in tatters, and his Cylinder would have failed in its aims. The same is true of the Verse Account, which sought to blacken the name of the final native king of Babylon in order to show Cyrus in a positive light, but which would obviously have failed to do so had it named the wrong person as Babylon's last king.

Only the Book of Daniel suggests otherwise and, on this particular matter, can easily be discredited. The final form of the Book as we have it was not written until the 160s BC,



almost 400 years after the event, so it would be unsurprising if it contains some factual errors. Indeed, it is evident that the author/authors made mistakes when it came to the names of the key actors. Thus, the Book concludes by claiming that the kingdom fell to 'Darius the Mede', but we know that Babylon was actually conquered by Cyrus (Darius did not come to the throne until the 520s and was, in fact, a Persian and not a Mede). Equally, Belshazzar is described as the son of Nebuchadnezzar, but was actually the son of Nabonidus. The cuneiform documents do refer to a Belshazzar, but he was evidently the son of Nabonidus and there is no evidence that he ever succeeded his father.

2. Explain the error in the Book of Daniel.

There are a number of ways to explain the error in the Book of Daniel. The most obvious is that the Book was written in the 160s BC, some 4 centuries after the events described, and that the author of the Book had very limited information about events in Babylon at the time. Indeed, the fact that 'Darius the Mede' is named as the conqueror of the city would suggest that this was the case, as would the fact that Belshazzar's father is named as Nebuchadnezzar. Since Nebuchadnezzar is probably the most famous of the Babylonian kings, we might well reach the conclusion that the author was simply utilising the names he knew from Babylonian history and had no access to contemporary information. This is a particularly negative reading of the Book of Daniel, and it would suggest that there is little hope of finding anything of historical value in the text (or, rather, little of use to a historian of Babylon in the text – the Book of Daniel is no doubt very useful to scholars interested in second-century BC Judea).

There are, however, other, more positive, ways to interpret the error. For instance, Belshazzar was clearly a historical figure and the cuneiform documents demonstrate that he played an important role in Babylonian society – both the Nabonidus Chronicle and the Verse Account refer to him commanding the army. As the last important figure within the Babylonian dynasty, Belshazzar could easily have been remembered as the last king of Babylon, even though he never actually attained that position.

Indeed, this begs the question 'what does it mean to be a king?' In legal terms, a king has to undergo certain rites of initiation – most obviously a coronation, in which he takes the crown of the kingdom. There is no evidence that Belshazzar ever underwent such a ceremony and so, in legal terms, he was never a king of Babylon. But kings are also expected to fulfil certain functions. These functions differ from place to place, but, in the ancient world, chief among them was the requirement to command the army and to participate in, and perhaps even lead, traditional religious ceremonies. The cuneiform texts make it clear that Nabonidus relinquished many of these duties to Belshazzar during his reign. For all he wasn't legally the king, then, it is evident that, in many respects, Belshazzar was acting as king for much of his father's reign; indeed, we might go as far as to describe him as 'regent' for his father, although whether he was ever accorded an official title like this is unclear.

The ultimate author of the Book of Daniel is unknown (although it is ascribed to Daniel), however, it is clear that the Book is based on Jewish traditions concerning Babylon. As foreigners in the city, and likely with limited exposure to the inner workings of the political elite, the interaction that Jews had with the Babylonian king would have been limited, and would likely have occurred only in quite formal settings – the Jews, for instance, might have paid tribute (a ceremonial tax which indicated acceptance of inferior status) to the



Babylonian king. These formal occasions would have continued even in Nabonidus' absence, but the role of the king would have been taken by Belshazzar (although it does appear from the Nabonidus Chronicle that some of the major religious occasions, which required the presence of the king himself, did not take place). The Jews would have interacted with Belshazzar precisely as they would have done with any other Babylonian king and, consequently, it is easy to see how they could mistakenly have concluded that Belshazzar was indeed the king. If a person looks like a king, and acts like a king, you can see why some people might conclude that he was the king. Indeed, from a Jewish perspective, as a subject peoples, ruled by a foreign king, the identity of the king didn't matter much in practical terms, all that mattered was that there was a king. Belshazzar was the person that the Jews interacted with and so on forth, so, to all intents and purposes, he was their king.

Beyond this, it is possible that although the version of the Book of Daniel that was written down in the 160s was not the first version, and that it either records, or is based on, earlier material; it is certainly possible that the story had been told for generations and passed on orally. Although societies with a strong oral culture are able to pass on tales with remarkable accuracy, it is not uncommon for little details to change. It is perfectly possible, then, that the original tale accurately reflected the complicated political situation in Babylon during the reign of Nabonidus, but that, over time, things were simplified. After all, from a Jewish perspective, the important point to take from the story is not the name of the king of Babylon, but evidence of the power of YAHWEH and, thus, the importance of the Jewish people as a whole in the eyes of god. Given this aim, it would hardly be surprising if little factual details were lost over a 400 year period.