

THE OPEN GATES

The Story of Cyrus, Daniel, and Darius

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Dedication

To Jesus
who will open the gates
of heaven so His people
can go home.

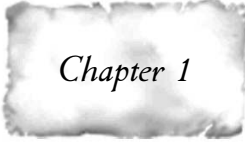
Contents

	Chronology chart	9
CHAPTER 1	The Gathering Storm	11
CHAPTER 2	Homesick for Jerusalem	28
CHAPTER 3	Rise of the Eastern Star	41
CHAPTER 4	One Last Chance	56
CHAPTER 5	Lower the River	73
CHAPTER 6	Handwriting on the Wall	86
CHAPTER 7	Uninvited Guests	102
CHAPTER 8	The Liberator	121
CHAPTER 9	Out of the Lions' Jaws	139
CHAPTER 10	Open the Gates	162

A Chronology of the Time of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, and Media-Persia

Years BC	Babylon	Prophets	Major Events
587			-Belshazzar born
586	Nebuchadnezzar	Jeremiah	-Jerusalem destroyed
585			Nabonidus intercedes
584		Daniel	between Media and Lydia
583			
582		=* Ezekiel	-Nebuchadnezzar invades
581		=	Judah after Gedaliah's murder;
580			fights Syria, Ammon, Moab,
579			Egypt.
578			
577			
576			
575			
574			
573			
572			-Fall of Tyre
571			-Nebuchadnezzar's madness begins
570			
569		=*	-Eclipse
568		=	
567			
566			
565			(?)Nebuchadnezzar's last decree
564			about God (Dan. 4)
563			
562			-Nebuchadnezzar dies
561	Amel-Marduk		
560			-Belshazzar occupies important
559			government position
558	Nergal-Sharusur		-Cyrus becomes king in Anshan
557			-Nabonidus appointed by citizen's
556	Labashi-Marduk (2 months)		committee
555			-Cyrus/Nabonidus treaty
554			
553			
552			Belshazzar becomes coregent
551			Nabonidus begins Tema Campaign
550			Cyrus becomes king of Media
549			Daniel has vision of ch. 7
548	Nabonidus / Belshazzar		-Daniel's vision of ch. 8
547			-Croesus attacks Cappadocia
546			-Cyrus conquers Lydia and
545			Greek cities
544			
543			
542			
541			
540	END OF BABYLON; BEGINNING OF MEDIA-PERSIA		Cyrus attacks Babylon
539			-Handwriting on wall/fall of Babylon
538	Darius / Cyrus		(?) Lions' den
537			
536			
535			
534			
533			

*Ending dates of prophets' ministries not known.



Chapter 1

The Gathering Storm

“Gobryas!” Belshazzar demanded, stumbling down the steps of the throne. “How do you know? I thought Cyrus led the Persian army.”

“And s-so did the general.” The frightened servant fell back in terror, for the king’s son had absolute power in his father’s absence. “But the Gutiumite b-banner waves above the commander’s ch-chariot.”

The Babylonian king turned pale. He feared the governor of Gutium (Elam) more than anyone else on earth. Without another word he dashed from the throne room, called for his horse, and galloped through the Ishtar Gate toward the north outer wall. His bodyguards stumbled all over themselves in their efforts to keep up.

Taking the steps up the wall two at a time, he soon scanned the approaching enemy horde. The cavalry forces led the massive army, overspreading the road, steeds prancing, riders sitting bolt upright. Behind them rumbled hundreds of battle chariots, drawn by two or four horses, each vehicle carrying a driver and from one to four archers or spearmen. The infantry followed in battle armor, carrying shields of leather stretched over lightweight thongs—some overlaid with thin sheets of polished brass or copper. Last came the supply wagons and a multitude of camp followers—including cooks, attendants, wives, and female servants.

The sheer immensity of the army and the arrogance of well-organized fighting men radiated a sense of overwhelm-

The Open Gates

ing power. Brilliant banners flickered above the columns, suspended from spears held aloft by elite corpsmen.

But Belshazzar's eyes focused on the gold-plated chariot near the center of the multitude. Dwarfing all others and pulled by six white stallions, the vehicle had a fringed canopy and displayed carvings of cult symbols and previous victorious battles. Gobryas, in colorful battle dress, stood ramrod straight with dozens of guards, servants, and attendants riding nearby.

The king's son had no doubts now. His personal enemy approached with an army capable of taking any city. Retribution had come, and he trembled with terror.

Seeking to hide his fright, Belshazzar began to laugh. "Who do the Persians think they are?" he roared. "Babylon has unscalable walls, unbreakable gates. Disease would decimate their ranks before they'd ever be able to conquer us."

"General!" he called as he turned to leave. "Don't get bored watching that exercise in futility. Ha! They'll never get in here." With that he returned to the palace and lost himself in a flask of wine.

What Belshazzar didn't understand was that Babylon's strength didn't lie in its walls or well-trained and equipped army, but in the caliber of its leaders. The city had existed more than 1,000 years, and for most of that time had been the pawn of other powerful nations.

Nebuchadnezzar had lifted Babylon to a height it had never known before, and had conquered or controlled most of the Near Eastern world. Although he ruled with an iron hand, his citizens profited from his justice and benevolence. Among his conquests had been the small nation of Judah. He had transported many of its people—along with those of other defeated territories—to Babylonia. Most of them had better conditions in the land of their exile than they'd known in their own countries. The people of Judah bought land and businesses and prospered during their captivity.

The Gathering Storm

After Nebuchadnezzar died, his son Amel-Marduk took the throne. He showed kindness to the Jews by freeing King Jehoiachin. The now-graying monarch had spent 37 years in prison. The new king provided him with a house for his family and issued him food and clothing to meet his needs.

For all his kindness, Nebuchadnezzar's son lacked wisdom and administrative skill. Babylonians seldom forgave inefficiency in their kings, and unrest brewed. After only two years he died at the hands of his brother-in-law Nergal-sharusur.

The exiles from Palestine trembled when Nergal-sharusur took the throne, for he had commanded Nebuchadnezzar forces at the final battle against Jerusalem. He had no love for the Hebrews, and their social position suffered during his reign.

An old man when he took the throne, Nergal-sharusur soon found his health beginning to deteriorate. His only son, Labashi-Marduk—young and immature—showed neither wisdom nor the ability to rule. The old king feared that the empire might collapse if the boy became king, so he appointed his brother-in-law Nabonidus to follow him.

Nabonidus had good parentage, but he hadn't descended from royal blood. Nor did he have any relationship to Nergal-sharusur—except that the two had married daughters of Nebuchadnezzar.

In spite of Nergal-sharusur's efforts, his foolish son seized the throne anyway. Labashi-Marduk exulted that he had overruled his father's will, and he proudly claimed every royal privilege for himself.

Because he knew nothing of administration or justice, his supporters soon realized their mistake. Within a year of his coronation, his "friends" took control of the palace guard, arrested the king as a malefactor, and tortured him until he died. Having saved the throne from mindless tyranny, they appointed Nabonidus to assume his place.

Although Nabonidus had never dreamed of becoming

The Open Gates

king of Babylon, he now commanded absolute power over the lives of all his subjects. “It’s enough to turn the head of almost anyone,” he confided in Nitocris, his wife. “And I’ll bet you never thought you’d be queen.”

“No,” the mature but still beautiful woman replied as her maidservant arranged her hair. “Mother was an Egyptian princess before she married Nebuchadnezzar, but he never considered her more than a secondary wife. I’m sure he’d have never married me off to you had he felt otherwise.” She laughed at the irony.

“I suppose not,” he muttered, his thoughts wandering to other topics. Soon he began to pace the room.

“That poem you recited at the coronation was beautiful,” the maid said after a few moments. An older woman, she had lived in their household for many years. “Would you say it again?”

Startled, Nabonidus had to think a moment. Then his resonant voice echoed through the room.

“Unto the midst of the palace they brought me
And all of them cast themselves at my feet,
And kissed my feet, and paid homage to my royalty.
At the command of Marduk, my lord,
I was raised to the sovereignty of the land,
While they exclaimed, ‘Father of the land!’
I do not have an equal!”

“May my lord rule long and prosper,” she said when he finished. Nabonidus smiled at her and stopped in front of the window, staring into the garden. He watched as an elderly man bent over to sniff the rose blossoms. *That’s Daniel*, he mused. *After all these years he’s still a member of the royal advisors.*

Years ago he had watched from another palace window as Nebuchadnezzar ate grass like an ox. He and Nitocris had

The Gathering Storm

marveled at the kindness of this Jewish captive and the power of his God in humbling the king of Babylon.

The king's mind wandered again. *Why did they choose me? One of the generals could have ruled with a strong hand. So why did they pick me?*

He glanced again at his wife, and at once he knew. *They chose me because of her. She's the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, and her son—our son—is the most direct heir to the throne.*

The recognition both pleased and unsettled him. Pleased to be king; unsettled that it hadn't been because of his own merits. Embarrassment swept over him as he wondered how many people knew that he'd been selected only to preserve the kingdom for his firstborn son—Belshazzar.

Nitocris guessed the reason for his silence and approached him. "Don't fret about our relationship to Nebuchadnezzar," she whispered as she stroked his beard. "Your father was a noble prince, and your mother the most revered priestess of the moon god Sin. The nobles chose you because you're the most respected man in the kingdom. Remember your diplomatic mission to Lydia?"

How could he forget? Thirty years ago Media's armies had spent five years fighting warlike tribes from Lydia. They'd begun to fret because the battles had come to a stalemate, so they had asked Babylon to help them settle the dispute by mediation. Nebuchadnezzar sent Nabonidus, and the young man had been so successful that the two countries formed an alliance. They sealed their pact by the marriage of the daughter of Alyattes the Lydian to Astyages the Mede.

"Everyone knows about your part in that agreement," Nitocris continued. "And through the years you've been one of the highest officials in the kingdom."

She clasped her hands behind his neck. "You have no equal, Nabonidus, my love." Standing on her toes, she kissed his cheek above his curly beard. "For many years, you've