

Belshazzar's Feast and the Cult of the Moon God Sîn*

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Beaulieu has recently suggested that the festival which ancient sources connect with the fall of Babylon in 539 BC may have been an akitu festival in honor of the moon god Sîn. This proposal can be supported by two additional arguments. First, the dates of the festival (the 16th and 17th of Tagritu) would always have come immediately after the Harvest Moon or Hunter's Moon. Second, a Mesopotamian akitu festival celebrated in Tašritu and dedicated to the moon god appears to be the background of the Aramaic liturgy preserved in Papyrus Amherst 63. Given the religious politics of Nabonidus' last years, in which Sîn was promoted at the expense of Marduk, it is likely that a similar akitu festival took place in Babylon at the time of its fall.

Key Words: Belshazzar, Sîn, Nabonidus, akitu, Dan 5

According to Daniel 5, the Neo-Babylonian king Belshazzar was celebrating a great feast in the night when Babylon fell and he himself met his death. Although the Greek writers Herodotus and Xenophon also mention a feast at the time of Babylon's fall, many biblical scholars have been reluctant to give the story much credence.¹ On the other hand, Assyriologists like Paul Garelli and archaeologists like David Stronach are prepared to accept the historicity of Belshazzar's feast.²

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An intriguing attempt to give the story some historical plausibility was undertaken some years ago by William Shea, who argues that the feast in question might have been a celebration of Belshazzar's coronation as sole ruler, after the defeat of his father Nabonidus.³ Although this proposal would explain a number of historical difficulties in the story of Belshazzar, it is not supported by any explicit contemporary records and remains quite speculative.⁴

* I would like to thank the following scholars for reading an earlier version of this paper: K. van der Toorn (University of Leiden), R. Steiner (Yeshiva University), and P-A. Beaulieu (Yale University).

¹ See for example S. R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901) xxxi, 61; L. F. Hartman and A. A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel* (AB 23; New York: Doubleday, 1978) 185-87; J. E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (WBC 30; Dallas: Word, 1987) 107, and Lester B. Grabbe, "The Belshazzar of Daniel and the Belshazzar of History," *AUSS* 26 (1988) 59.

² P. Garelli, "Nabonide," *DBSup*, fasc. 31 (1968) 285, and D. Stronach, *Pasargadae: A Report on the Excavations Conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies from 1961 to 1963* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 291.

³ See W. H. Shea, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel: An Update," *AUSS* 20 (1982) 133- 49.

⁴ See the critical remarks of Goldingay, *Daniel*, 108, and Grabbe, "The Belshazzar of Daniel," 59, 63.

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The purpose of the present essay is to draw attention to the evidence that suggests that Belshazzar's feast is to be understood as an *akitu* festival in honor of the Babylonian moon god Sîn. I shall first mention two scholars who have recently suggested, apparently independently of each other, that Daniel 5 reflects an *akitu* festival and then propose some new evidence that supports this conclusion.

The *akitu* suggestion was first made in 1989 by Paul-Alain Beaulieu, in his book *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556-539 B.C.*,⁵ which is currently the most authoritative account of the reign of Belshazzar's father, based on a careful study of all the relevant cuneiform inscriptions. One of the major themes of this book is the determined attempt made by Nabonidus to replace Marduk as head of the Babylonian pantheon with the moon god Sîn. Part of this revolutionary religious policy was the restoration of the temple of Sîn in Ḫarran, a city traditionally devoted to the worship of the moon god. It was in Ḫarran, with which Nabonidus had strong personal ties, that there was an *akitu* festival of Sîn, apparently celebrated on the seventeenth of Tašritu.⁶

When Beaulieu comes to his discussion of the fall of Babylon, he brings the above information to bear on the stories of the feast found in Herodotus, Xenophon, and Daniel. He writes:

The tradition of the festivities might reflect historical fact. According to the chronicle, Babylon was taken on the sixteenth of Tašritu. Accepting that Nabonidus imposed new features of the cult of Sîn in the capital after his return from Teima, it is conceivable that festivals linked with the cult of Sîn at Ḫarran were transplanted to Babylon, perhaps even the *akitu* festival. This festival started on the seventeenth of Tašritu (see p. 152). As Babylon was captured on the eve of the seventeenth, the festivities mentioned by Herodotus and the Book of Daniel may have been those of the Ḫarran *akitu* festival, as celebrated in the capital by the supporters of Nabonidus.⁷

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By putting Belshazzar's feast in the context of Nabonidus's overall program of promoting the worship of Sîn, Beaulieu can make a plausible case for connecting this feast with the *akitu* festival of Ḫarran, especially since the date of the latter virtually coincides with the date of the former.

A similar point was made in 1990 by Lawrence M. Wills, in his book *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends*.⁸ In a discussion of the relationship of the Old Greek to the Masoretic Text in Daniel 5, Wills makes the following comments:

The vague "great feast" (לחג גדול) in MT occurs at a very specific time in the OG proem: "in the day of the consecration festival of his palace" (ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἑθκατισμοῦ [sic εγκαιτισμοῦ] τῶν βασιλείων), most likely the day of the New Year (*akitu*) Festival. We see in the Wadi Brissa inscription mentioned above in regard to Daniel 4, that in the very

⁵ Yale Near Eastern Researches 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

⁶ Beaulieu, *Nabonidus*, 152.

⁷ Ibid. 226.

⁸ HDR 26; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.

context of the renewal of the palace there is a description of the New Year Festival and of the magnificent feast which Nebuchadnezzar set out for his honored guests.⁹

Although Wills considers the story of Belshazzar's feast to be fictitious, he argues that it is put in the realistic setting of the great feast that Nebuchadnezzar, according to one inscription, put on at the Babylonian *akitu* festival.¹⁰ Unlike Beaulieu, he does not put this festival in the context of the Sîn cult; in fact he seems to have in mind only the familiar *akitu* festival of Marduk, which was celebrated at the beginning of the religious New Year in Nisanu. He seems to be unaware that an *akitu* festival was also celebrated at the beginning of the civil New Year in Tašritu. Nevertheless, it is striking that he too sees in Belshazzar's feast a description of this characteristic Babylonian institution. The significance of his argument is that it gives independent support to one aspect of the suggestive proposal made by Beaulieu.

In what follows I shall present two further arguments in support of Beaulieu's proposal that Belshazzar's feast represents an *akitu* festival in honor of the moon god Sîn. The first is based on the astronomical facts of the moon's movements; the second on a recently deciphered Aramaic manuscript.

There is a good astronomical reason why a festival in honor of the moon god should be celebrated on the seventeenth of Tašritu and why that date should be one on which, according to Babylonian astrological lore, "Sîn is propitious to mankind."¹¹ The reason is that

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this date always falls in the days immediately following either the Harvest Moon or the Hunter's Moon, the only times during the year when the moon for several days running rises right after sunset and shines throughout the night.

The phenomenon in question is explained as follows in a nineteenth century book on astronomy cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* under "hunter":

There can, therefore, be but two full moons in the year which rise during a week almost at the same time as the sun sets; the former, occurring in September, is called the Harvest-Moon; and the latter, in the month of October, being in a similar predicament, is termed the Hunter's Moon.¹²

The phenomenon of Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon has to do with the angle of the ecliptic relative to the horizon and is technically described in terms of the moon's "retardation" in different seasons of the year.¹³ Without going into the details of the celestial mechanics involved, we note that the full moon nearest the fall equinox (the Harvest Moon) introduces a

⁹ Wills, *The Jew in the Court*, 123-24.

¹⁰ See also Wills, *The Jew in the Court*, 105, n. 67.

¹¹ See Beaulieu, *Nabonidus*, 152.

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "hunter," 5c. Strictly speaking, this statement is not accurate, since the Harvest Moon occasionally occurs in early October.

¹³ For explanations of the phenomenon of Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon, see for example P. Moore, *Guide to the Moon* (London: Lutterworth, 1976) 52-54, and Fred W. Price, *The Moon Observer's Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 44-46.

period of several days when the moon rises right after the sunset, and that the same phenomenon, though less marked, can be observed after the next full moon (the Hunter's Moon). Although it is true at every full moon that sunset and moonrise are virtually simultaneous, it is only in the case of Harvest and Hunter's Moon that this near simultaneity holds for a longer period. The effect, of course, is that the moon has the whole night to itself for a number of successive nights.

Because the Babylonians used a lunar calendar that was periodically intercalated to make it match the solar year, the seventeenth of Tašritu would invariably come right after either the Harvest Moon or the Hunter's Moon, and would therefore always fall in one of the two periods of near simultaneity that we have described. We find a close parallel in the case of the Jewish feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot, which begins on the fifteenth of Tishri. Since the Jewish calendar is modeled on the Babylonian one, and Tishri is simply the Jewish equivalent of Babylonian Tašritu, it is instructive to observe that the first day of Sukkot always falls within a day or two of either the Harvest Moon or the Hunter's Moon. In 1991, for example, it coin-

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cided with Harvest Moon (Sept. 23), as it did in 1990 (Oct. 4), but in 1989 it fell on the same day as Hunter's Moon (Oct. 14). It is clear that the third day of Sukkot, which corresponds to the seventeenth of Tašritu in the Babylonian calendar, would in each case come in the days immediately following these two special full moons.

The upshot of these reflections on the lunar calendar is therefore that the seventeenth of Tašritu always fell during one of the two periods of the year that the moon had an unusually prominent place at night. It should also be remembered that the Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon, by a curious trick of perception, are popularly believed to be unusually large and luminous.¹⁴ It is therefore singularly appropriate that the *akitu* festival in honor of the moon god Sîn should take place on the seventeenth of Tašritu, when the lunar deity, several days after full moon, retained its sway throughout the night.

In light of this, it is significant that Daniel 5 pictures Belshazzar's feast as a *nocturnal* festivity. Xenophon also explicitly states that the festival in question lasted the entire night (ὅλην τὴν νύκτα).¹⁵ This is a detail that supports Beaulieu's hypothesis that it was indeed the *akitu* festival in honor of Sîn that was celebrated in Babylon on that fateful Tašritu night, since it was only during the night that the moon god showed himself to his worshipers in all his splendor.

We turn now to the second argument. Our discussion so far has served to support the hypothesis of an *akitu* festival in honor of the moon god Sîn, which was celebrated during the month of Tašritu both in H̄arran and in Babylon. This hypothesis has recently received strong support in an article by Richard C. Steiner, which appeared in 1991 in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.¹⁶ The article is entitled "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script: The Liturgy of a New Year's Festival Imported from Bethel to Syene by Exiles from Rash," and

¹⁴ Moore, *Guide to the Moon*, 54.

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.5.15.

¹⁶ *JAOS* 111 (1991) 362-63.

reports on the latest results of the attempt to decipher and interpret Papyrus Amherst 63. This intriguing text, which had earlier yielded a paganized version of Psalm 20,¹⁷ seems to have belonged to a community of people originally from Rash in Mesopotamia who had first been deported to Bethel in Samaria by the Neo-Assyrians, and had subsequently found their way to Syene in Egypt.

The relevance of Steiner's article to the theme of this article is clear from the following quotation:

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It is now clear that we are dealing with the liturgy of a New Year's festival (IVB/8 *rs.š.n.n^m*) celebrated in Epiph = Tishri (VIII/13, XV/2), like the Jewish Rosh Hashanah holiday, rather than in Nisan, the first month of the Persian-Babylonian calendar. The rituals of the festival, as narrated in the text, are similar to those of the Babylonian Akitu festival.¹⁸

It seems, therefore, that the enigmatic Papyrus Amherst 63 preserves the liturgy of an *akitu* festival that was celebrated in the Jewish month Tishri, that is, the Babylonian month Tašritu.

This *akitu* festival also had a connection with the moon god. According to the earlier article on this text, written by Steiner together with Charles Nims in 1983, in which they published their discovery of the paganized version of Psalm 20 in Papyrus Amherst 63, the deity to which the liturgy was dedicated had as one of his names *Sahar*, the West Semitic name of the moon god.¹⁹ Furthermore, Steiner and Nims deduced from a number of features in the text that the prayer embedded in the liturgy was recited at night, possibly when the moon was visible.²⁰

The liturgy apparently goes back to an original setting in Rash (or Arash), a region situated between Babylonia and Elam,²¹ and to the time of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal.²² Although Steiner does not mention it, it is also significant that the Rash of the liturgical papyrus was geographically close to Ur, which was one of the two traditional centers (along with Ḫarran) of moon worship in ancient Mesopotamia.²³ What is more, there is evidence of an *akitu* festival in Ur, which was celebrated in the month of Tašritu in honor of the god Nanna (Nannar), the other traditional name of the moon god in the cuneiform documents.²⁴

Taking all these data together, it appears that Papyrus Amherst 63 preserves elements of the liturgy of an ancient Mesopotamian nocturnal *akitu* festival, celebrated in honor of the moon god in the month Tašritu. This of course fits perfectly with the thesis that Belshazzar's feast represents just such an *akitu* festival.

¹⁷ Charles P Nims and Richard C. Steiner, "A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2-6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," *JAOS* 103 (1983) 261-74.

¹⁸ Steiner, "Liturgy," 362.

¹⁹ Nims and Steiner, "Paganized Version," 264, 265, 270.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 269, 270-71.

²¹ Steiner, "Liturgy," 362.

²² *Ibid.* 363.

²³ See *Les religions du Proche-Orient asiatique. Textes babyloniens, ougaritiques, hittites* (ed. R. Labat et al.; Paris: Fayard/Denoël, 1970) 281, and *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 10.310.

²⁴ See F. Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels accadiens* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1921) 87, 88.

To summarize our argument to this point, we can say that there is evidence from Ḥarran, Rash, and Ur for an *akitu* festival in honor of

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the moon god celebrated in the month Tašritu. Since Belshazzar's feast was also a festival celebrated in Tašritu, specifically in the days following the Hunter's Moon, it is likely that it is a fourth example of this *akitu* festival of the moon god. As Beaulieu has seen, this conclusion fits well with what we know about Nabonidus and his religious policies in the closing years of the Neo-Babylonian empire. After an absence of ten years in Teima, during which he had left his son Belshazzar in charge of Babylon, Nabonidus had returned in 543 BC, timing his return to coincide with the date of the Ḥarran *akitu* festival on the seventeenth of Tašritu.²⁵ In the final four years of his reign he worked actively to promote the worship of Sîn, seeking to replace Marduk as the head of the Babylonian pantheon. He completed the restoration of the two major shrines of the moon god, the Eḫulḫul of Ḥarran and the ziggurat of Ur.²⁶ Tašritu He even attempted to convert the great temple of Marduk in Babylon (the Esagil) to the worship of Sîn.²⁷ Needless to say, he encountered the fierce resistance of the priests of Marduk, who were already incensed because the king had for several years, by his absence, effectively canceled the great *akitu* festival in honor of Marduk, which was celebrated in the month Nisanu.²⁸ The outrage of the Marduk priests is reflected in the so-called "Verse Account of Nabonidus," which accuses Nabonidus of worshiping the god "Ilteri"—a designation that turns out to be an enigmatic spelling of *Sahar*, the West Semitic name of the moon god.²⁹ It would be entirely consonant with the general policy of Nabonidus if, in these final years, he introduced into Babylon that other *akitu* festival in honor of Sîn that was celebrated in Tašritu and had his son and coregent Belshazzar preside over it in his absence. In fact, Beaulieu has recently suggested, in another connection, that the king may have organized religious ceremonies for Sîn in Babylon during the last year of his reign.³⁰

The picture that emerges is therefore the following. In the final years of the Neo-Babylonian empire, there were two *akitu* festivals, one in honor of Marduk, which was celebrated in Nisanu, the other in honor of Sîn, which was celebrated in Tašritu. Both were New Year festivals, Since the cultic year began in Nisanu and the civil year began in Tašritu (in fact, the name *tašritu* means "beginning" in Akkadian).

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We must bear in mind that such a double *akitu* celebration is also attested elsewhere in ancient Mesopotamia.³¹ Because Nabonidus was fanatically devoted to Sîn at the expense of Marduk,

²⁵ Beaulieu, *Nabonidus*, 152.

²⁶ See Beaulieu, *Nabonidus*, 205-9, 212, and Beaulieu, "An Episode in the Fall of Babylon to the Persians," *JNES* 52 (1993) 254.

²⁷ Beaulieu, *Nabonidus*, 61-62, 216-17.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 150, 186-87.

²⁹ See Beaulieu, "Neo-Babylonian Larsa: A Preliminary Study," *Or* 60 (1991) 80-81.

³⁰ Beaulieu, "An Episode," 255.

³¹ See F Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels Accadiens*, 86-88, and S. A. Pallis, *The Babylonian Akîtu Festival* (Copenhagen: Bianco Lunos, 1926) 30-31. More recently, see Ichiro Nakata, "Problems of the Babylonian *akitu* Festival," *JANESCU* 1 (1968) 48; K. van der Toorn, "Het Babylonische Nieuwjaarsfeest," *Phoenix* [Leiden] 36

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he boycotted the *akitu* festival in Nisanu and favored the *akitu* festival in Tašritu. Belshazzar's feast as recorded in Daniel 5 therefore fits well, not only with what we know of the *akitu* festival of the moon god in Ḫarran, Rash, and Ur, but also with what we know of the overall politics of the last years of Babylon.

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(1990) 11, and van der Toorn, "The Babylonian New Year Festival: New Insights from the Cuneiform Texts and their Bearing on Old Testament Study," *VTSup* 43 (1991) 332.