

Pay Day, Some Day: The Handwriting on the Wall

Daniel Chapter Five

Background: Nebuchadnezzar has died and Nabonidus has replaced him as king. Belshazzar was not the son of Nebuchadnezzar but of Nabonidus who had married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar which makes Belshazzar the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar (see Jer. 27:7). As king over Babylon, he was officially and legally the son of Nebuchadnezzar. The word son in the Bible is often used to mean descendant.

I. The Banquet in Babylon – Daniel 5:1-5

Belshazzar holds a banquet by bringing in holy vessels (cups, chalices, candlestick, etc...) from the Temple in Jerusalem in an attempt to conjure favor from the gods (5:3–4). It is possible that the king knew the Medes and Persians were at the gates of the city (5:30–31) so “They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone” (see 5:4; and Isaiah 44:9–20).

A. Belshazzar believed the vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem had cultic or occult powers.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) two Army intelligence agents explain that the Nazis are on a quest to gain occult power. They are searching for Abner Ravenwood who knows where the Ark of the Covenant is stored. When the Nazis attempt to use it, the process backfires. Ravenwood’s character is based on the life of **Trevor Ravenscroft** who wrote *Spear of Destiny* (1973) which claims that Hitler started World War II to capture the spear which pierced the side of Jesus.

B. The lampstand is a witness to the events of the chapter.

The lampstand sheds light (Exodus 25:37; cf. John 16:8). The only God who is speaking is the God associated with the Temple’s lampstand (see Zechariah 4:1-6). God weighs man’s actions.

C. The feast is called a “great bread and drinking feast” (5:1) (*lechem* is Hebrew for ‘bread’ as in Bethlehem, city of bread). *The feast is a counterfeit to the true Bread and Wine* (I Cor. 11:29-30).

II. The Handwriting in the Hall – Daniel 5:5-29 – MENE, MENE, TEKEL UPHARSIN.

“Suddenly the fingers of a man’s hands emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand...” (5:5).

A. The young king is shaken, so much so that he soils himself ... (v. 6) “his hip joints went slack” (*the knots of his loins were untied* - KJV). His sphincter muscle gave way. Euphemisms like this are common in the Bible (e.g., Judges 3:24: “covering his feet” or “relieving himself”). The reaction of the king is exactly what happens on the Day of Judgment.

B. The message is a cryptic four words that need interpretation.

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. We don’t know if they were written across or top to bottom.

There was no context to the Aramaic words. Like Hebrew, Aramaic is written without vowels, so a number of translations could have been possible (ex: “God is nowhere, God is now here”).

C. Daniel is called for by the Queen to help King Belshazzar.

Daniel gives the meaning “Reckoned. Reckoned, weighed (assessed) and found wanting.”

MENE: God has reckoned your reign and brought it to an end.

TEKEL: You have been weighed and found wanting. (For all have sinned and come short).

UPHARSIN (or PERES): He assessed your kingdom and handed it to the Medes and Persians.

There is no ambiguity in Daniel’s interpretation: “Your kingdom has been paid over to the Medes and Persians. ... *“That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain”* (5:28–30).

D. The shadow the Lampstand casts (see Ex. 25:37) on the plaster wall looks like balancing scales.

This incredible chapter should remind every human being that the fundamental truth that must be understood is— God is just. He created man to be holy, moral and upright, and there is coming a day of reckoning when each person’s life will be weighed in the balances. We need a Savior.

III. The Reprobation of a Royal – Daniel 5:29-20 – *“That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean died.”*

The problem with Belshazzar was the same problem his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had spiritually. *“Yet you, his (Nebuchadnezzar’s) son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this (about your grandfather), but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified”* (Daniel 5:22-23).

A. Chapter 5 begins with Belshazzar trying to humiliate Daniel.

He called him “one of the sons” [Heb. *bene*] of the “captivity” of Judah. The king feigns as if he does not know Daniel or what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, but that’s false (see 5:22).

B. The Queen seems to be a believer who has the best interest of Belshazzar.

She was not in attendance at the feast. She comes when she learns the king is in desperate need. *“There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans [and] diviners. [This was] because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation”* (Daniel 5:10-12). Daniel, once again, interprets the vision.

IV. The Salvation of a Sinner (John 8).

There is a remarkable parallel between Daniel 5 and John 8.

1. There are great sinners in each chapter (Belshazzar the King and an Adulterous Woman).
2. There is handwriting from God in each chapter (on a wall and in the dirt).
3. The vessels of the Temple are present (the lampstand, the light, and the table of shewbread).
4. Both sinners encounter God in their sin and must answer to the King of Kings.
5. But what is amazing about this story is that one is condemned, and one is delivered.

The story of the woman taken in adultery occurs between the Bread and the Lampstand sections of John. John’s gospel presents Jesus as the one Who tabernacled with us (John 1:14), and in part the gospel moves through the furniture of the tabernacle. John 6 presents Jesus as the bread of life, and in John 7 He is the drink of real life (v. 37). Jesus as True Bread is set in contrast to the false loaves, the scribes, and Pharisees. As Belshazzar was bread that was measured and found wanting, so are the Jewish leaders on this occasion. Like the hand writing on the wall, Jesus as the New Lampstand writes on the floor of Temple.

Belshazzar is without excuse.

“You, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart. You have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron (i.e., earthly kingdoms) But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified” (vv. 22-23).

The kingdom of the Babylonians (who had conquered the Assyrians) lasted a total of 70 years. From 609 BC to 539 BC the Babylonians ruled other nations, until the Persians conquered them in 539 BC. How the Persians conquered the Babylonian empire by digging under the walls of Babylon illustrates a man’s ego leading to a mighty fall. Cyrus, king of Persia, placed Darius the Mede in charge of Babylon, and the Persian Empire begins (from 539 BC to 330 BC).