

## Daniel 5:1-31

### Belshazzar's Feast

When you want a person to realize that something is over and done with, and pursuing it further is futile, you tell them to just "See the handwriting on the wall."

That phrase comes directly from this incident in Daniel 5.

In this chapter, Nebuchadnezzar has died, and a different king is in control. About 10 years have passed, and a lot has happened.

Nebuchadnezzar died after a 43-year reign, followed by a time of political chaos and assassination. His son Evil-Merodach (described in **2 Kings 25:27-30** and **Jeremiah 52:31-34**) ruled for two years until he was assassinated by his brother-in-law Neriglissar. Neriglissar (mentioned as Nergalsharezer in **Jeremiah 39:3, 13**) ruled for four years until he died a natural death.

His son, Laborosoarchod, only a child and of diminished mental capacity, ruled for only nine months when he was beaten to death by a gang of conspirators. The conspirators appointed Nabonidus, one of their gang, to be king. He ruled until the Persians conquered Babylon.

So who was Belshazzar?

During the last part of the reign of Nabonidus he moved to Arabia and left the conduct of affairs in Babylon to his eldest son Belshazzar, who reigned as co-regent.

"Belshazzar" means "May Bel preserve the king."

The rabbis understood a particular verse in Isaiah to refer to Nebuchadnezzar and his descendants:

- **Isaiah 14:22** - "And I will rise up against them, saith the Lord of hosts, and cut off from Babylon name and remnant and son and grandchild, saith the Lord."

Name = Nebuchadnezzar, remnant = Evil-Merodach, son = Belshazzar and finally grandchild = Vashti - a *political* lineage of decreasing significance and increasing vanity and licentiousness.

As the scene opens in this chapter, Nabonidus had led an army against the invading forces of Medo-Persia but had been captured. That left Belshazzar as the sole remaining ruler.

The Medes and Persians now surrounded Babylon, but were unable to overcome its defenses. The walls of Babylon were 17 miles long, 22 feet thick and 90 feet high.

Though the city was under siege, Belshazzar felt secure with plenty of stockpiled supplies and trusting in his high walls.

Though surrounded by the enemy, Belshazzar threw a lavish party that highlights his pride and reckless, self-indulgent leadership.

**Daniel 5:1-2** - "Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein."

The Jewish translation adds "And he (Belshazzar) drank as much wine as the thousand."

The rabbis said that the king did this to mark what he felt was the failure of Jeremiah's prophecy that the Jewish exile would last 70 years:

- **Jeremiah 29:10** - "For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place."

But Belshazzar had miscalculated, the rabbis explained, by starting the 70 years at the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign instead of at the date of the destruction of Jerusalem.

Not only that, but a different "calculation" was going to bring on Belshazzar's own death - God had "numbered the days of his kingdom" and determined it had run out of time.

**Daniel 5:4** - "They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone."

The mention of the various substances used to create the idols reflect the different aspects of idolatry that we draw on from our own nature - both positive and negative, needing glory or redemptive sacrifice, appealing to either emotion or strict logic, offering pleasure or demanding pain, etc.

The defilement of the Temple vessels, mixed with the worship of false gods, prompted a miraculous response from God.

**Daniel 5:5** - "In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote."

The "candlestick" may have been the Golden Lampstand from the Temple, whose light now was supposed to honor the false gods, but instead projected an eerie figure of a

human hand inscribing a message of condemnation on the wall.

**Daniel 5:6** - "Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another."

God was an uninvited guest at this party, and He struck terror into Belshazzar.

**Daniel 5:7** - "The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."

None could interpret, or perhaps if they could read the Aramaic words, they didn't want to give the king its message.

But the queen remembered Daniel.

**Daniel 5:11-12** - "There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers; Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation."

Nebuchadnezzar is referred to as Belshazzar's "father" but it really means he was his political predecessor as king and ruler, because Belshazzar was not related to Nebuchadnezzar.

### **Daniel Interprets**

Daniel is brought in, and The king repeats his promise of rewards. But real prophets don't serve for rewards.

**Daniel 5:17** - "Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation."

Daniel recounts Nebuchadnezzar's achievements and greatness, and also his forced humility that came from God's hand.

**Daniel 5:20-21** - "But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and

that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will."

Then he comes to the meaning of the writing on the wall.

**Daniel 5:22-23** - "And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified:"

Humility is again the focus of this story.

- **Psalm 34:18** - "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."

When humility is discussed in the scriptures, it is often surrounded by companions - meekness, gentleness, kindness, patience - in fact all the fruits of the Spirit. They travel together.

Belshazzar had none of these. Nebuchadnezzar, on the other hand, was given opportunity to repent, which he did. Belshazzar - who could have repented but didn't - was given only a pronouncement of doom.

**Daniel 5:24-25** - "Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN."

These were Aramaic word that Daniel interprets with their closest meaning in Hebrew.

**Daniel 5:26-28** - "This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."

Aramaic was the common language. Everyone should have been able read it. But like Hebrew, it is written only with consonants not vowels, which leaves room for interpretation. Also, some of the words could be taken either as nouns or verbs. The Talmud says the words were written in vertical columns instead of the usual right-to-left to confuse the Babylonians. Belshazzar was hoping one of the magicians would interpret it in a positive way - put a good spin on it. False prophets always say what their patrons want to hear. But this time no one spoke up, except Daniel. He interprets the nouns as verbs - numbering, weighing and dividing.

The central message was not only for Belshazzar but for Babylon itself, and the world system it represents. Humanity has been weighed in the balance and found lacking. We are in need of redemption and forgiveness, which is why Jesus died on the cross.

Where once God had used Babylon as a vehicle of chastisement for Israel, now He was

using the Medes and Persians as a vehicle to destroy Babylon.

Events would soon prove that indeed "the most high God rules in the kingdom of men."

**Daniel 5:30-31** - "In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old."

NOTE: Was it Darius or Cyrus who overthrew Belshazzar? Darius was a sub-king under Cyrus the Persian. He is referred to in secular history as Gubaru.

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus relates that the Persian King Cyrus conquered Babylon by diverting the flow of the Euphrates into a nearby swamp. This lowered the level of the river so his troops marched through the water and under the river-gates. They still would not have been able to enter had not the bronze gates of the inner walls been left inexplicably unlocked. This was exactly what God predicted in **Isaiah 44:28-45:7** and **Jeremiah 51:57-58**. God opened the gates of the city of Babylon for Cyrus, and put it in writing 200 years before it happened.

See [https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik\\_david/study-guide/daniel/daniel-5.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/daniel/daniel-5.cfm)

### **Bottom Line:**

If we see ourselves as "weighed in the balance and found lacking," we are placed in a position of humility, and are then open to repentance. Otherwise we are paralyzed by pride and receive only the doom of Belshazzar.