

**The Book of Daniel
Comment and Commentary on the Book**

Part One: The Ministry of Daniel (and friends) in Babylon (1:1-6:28)

- A. The emergence of Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's court, 1:1-21
- B. The First Perplexing Dream of Nebuchadnezzar, 2:1-49
- C. The Protective Mercies of God-followers in Exile, 3:1-30
- D. The Testimony through Humbling of a Mighty Conqueror, 4:1-37
- E. The Belshazzar and the Eclipse of the Babylonian Empire, 5:1-31

Chapter 5 Lesson: This chapter, and the previous, at an applicational level deals with the terrible devastation that pride and arrogance brings though with contrastive outcomes. Chapter 4 tells us that a repentant heart brings with it restoration while in this chapter an unrepentant heart brings death and destruction. From the perspective of suffering exiles, the chapters comfort them with the knowledge that the fortunes of powerful monarch are in the hands of the God of Israel. To one monarch He extended grace through physical disablement to allow him to see the evil of arrogance and the wonder of forgiveness. To the other, he crushed without granting the grace of repentance. God controls the hearts of mankind and does as He please.

- 1. Belshazzar's banquet and writing on the wall, vv. 1-28

Parenthesis: *Belshazzar's absence from the list of Babylon's kings.*

Belshazzar is said to be the son of Nebuchadnezzar (5:22) and five times in the chapter it is stated that Nebuchadnezzar was his father (vv. 2, 7, 12, 16, 29). This is what we know.

-Belshazzar was the eldest son of Nabonidas and co-regent in his father's absence. Hence, he was in the royal lineage.

- For much of his reign (556-539) Nabonidas was fighting against predators advancing on the empire, returning only after the fall of Babylon.

- Thus, during his father's reign Belshazzar functioned as head of state. He technically could not be called a king and, therefore, he is absent from the monarchy list.

- Among the participants in Belshazzar's banquet were his wives and concubines, but there is no mention that there was a queen (v. 10, the queen there was likely his mother).

- Belshazzar rewarded Daniel as third in the kingdom (v. 29) suggesting that Belshazzar was second, not first.

- The Aramaic term "father" can denote other than direct lineage; it is used figuratively in the Old Testament. If that is the case here, Nebuchadnezzar was the grandfather of Belshazzar, Nabonidas his father.

- a. Belshazzar's great banquet, vv. 1-4

It tells us something of the character of Belshazzar that he partied the very night the city of Babylon fell to the Medes and the empire was no more (v. 30). It is reasonable that he was terrified by a mysterious handwriting on a wall. It seems that he was seeking to drown his fears in wine. His world was simply shattering and he parties. Instead of celebration, he should have spent the evening repenting ("you...have not humbled yourself... [v.22]"). Nebuchadnezzar repented and received his kingdom back (chapter 4); Belshazzar did not and lost it!

- 1) The grandeur of the banquet, v. 1

The context of this verse, a sumptuous party, was dire. A Medo-Persian army was outside the city walls; only the city of Babylon remained unconquered. The enormity of the guess-

list, one thousand nobles, may suggest that with his father's defeat and flight earlier, Belshazzar was claiming to be his father's successor.

- 2) The usage of goblets from Jerusalem's Temple, vv. 2-3
In a drunken stupor, he ordered goblets used for sacred worship (in this instance from the Jewish temple) for common use.
 - 3) The worship of the gods, v. 4
The goblets, used as trophies of war, the supremacy of the gods over the defeated God, were then employed to toast the pagan gods of Babylon (clearly an affront to the God of Israel).
- b. The mysterious writing on the wall, vv. 5-8

Rembrandt's
"The Feast of Belshazzar (1635)"

- 1) The appearance of script upon the wall, v. 5a
Amid the drunken, sacrilegious orgy a hand appeared and with it, a message inscribed on the wall. The mention of a lampstand suggests that the script was clearly visible to the guests.
 - 2) The effect on Belshazzar, vv. 5b-6
Seeing the hand and the writing caused Belshazzar to be so greatly alarmed that he became noticeably weak in his hips and legs, symptomatic of emotional panic.
 - 3) The call for an interpretation, v. 7a
In his distress he loudly called for his trusted advisors as his grandfather had and the result was the same, failure.
 - 4) The promise of reward for the interpretation, vv. 7b
"Third in the kingdom" suggests Nabonidas was first and Belshazzar second.
 - 5) The inability of the king's trusted advisors, v. 8
- c. The insight of the queen mother, vv. 9-12
- 1) The consternation of the king and nobles, v. 9
The failure of the astrologers to read and interpret the handwriting only heightened the anxiety of the king and left the nobles speechless.
 - 2) The intervention of the queen mother, vv. 10-12
 - a) The context, v. 10a
The noise from the perplexed and frighten guests and terrified king came to the attention of the queen mother. She seems to have entered the banquet hall without invitation and manifested considerable authority in speaking.



As stated above, Belshazzar had wives and concubines, but there is not mention of a queen, suggestive that he was a de facto king, his father, Nabonidas, the real king. The queen mother here was either his mother, his grandmother, or a step-grandmother (the wives of the king were already present).

- b) The witness of the queen mother, vv. 10b-12
 - (1) The offer of solace, v. 10b
For the comfort of the king, the queen mother made it clear that she knew someone who had the ability to interpret the handwriting.
 - (2) The acknowledgment of an interpreter, vv. 11a-12a

She made it known that there was one capable of interpreting mysteries who remained from Nebuchadnezzar's days, most likely unknown to Belshazzar. He was appointed chief of his grandfather's counselors who gave him the name of his god (Bel, also called Marduk), Belshazzar, though his name formerly was Daniel (it seems that she knew Daniel beyond mere hearsay.) By this time, the event of Nebuchadnezzar's death (561) was 23 years in the past and Daniel had not served in an official capacity with any subsequent monarch).

(3) The advice of the queen mother, v. 12b

d. The call and comments of Daniel, vv. 13-24

1) The identification of Daniel, vv. 13-17

a) His national origins, v. 13

Belshazzar seems to specifically identify Daniel, likely to be sure that he was the right Daniel among the Jewish exiles.

b) His abilities, v. 14

While the king had heard (repeated in v. 16) of Daniel's giftedness in interpreting mysteries, he attributed it to "the spirit of the gods," revealing his polytheistic beliefs.

c) The failure of the astrologers, v. 15

d) The promise of reward, v. 16

Belshazzar must have not realized yet the impending doom of his kingdom; the promise of becoming the "third ruler" seems empty with Nabonidas running for his life and the de facto "second ruler" gripped inoperative with fear and drink.

e) The rejection of a reward; the promise of success v.17

2) The rehearsal of Nebuchadnezzar's experience, vv. 18-21

Daniel records the history of his grandfather. As a great ruler, he was overcome with pride and arrogance due to his great power and authority. However, the "Most High God" sought to humble him through an animal-like condition depriving him of his kingdom. Through the terrible humbling, he came to realize that the "Most High God" is the true ruler over the nations. This was an extension of grace to his grandfather.

3) The contrastive experience of Belshazzar, vv. 22-24

At his point Daniel delivered a stinging rebuke ("But you..."). Knowing the humbling of his grandfather, who repented and was restored, Belshazzar would not. Proudness and arrogance were his downfall. He purposefully refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty and is the reason for the message on the wall; it is one of condemnation.

2. The interpretation of the writing on the wall, vv. 25-28

a) The identification of the writing, v. 25

"Mene, Mene, Teqel Pharsin"

b) The meaning of the writing, vv. 26-28

"Mene:" The word means "numbered;" it suggests a decreed, unavoidable judgment. It is repeated to emphasize inevitability. The origin of the writing was from heaven, so it was a divine judgment executed by the Medo-Persians.

"Teqel:" The word means weighed," "wanting," or "lacking." In comparison to the moral demands of God, the king did not measure up, God's character defining the standard, not mankind.

"Pharsin:" The word meaning "divided" carries the nuance of "destroyed" or "dissolved." There was a coalition of two powerful kingdoms that brought the Babylonian Empire to an end, the Medes likely more dominant since it appears first. It was the Persians who conquered the city of Babylon. "Pharsin" is something of a play-on-words hinting that the "Persians" will do it. Says Daniel, "...your kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (v. 28).

3. The consequence of the writing on the wall, vv. 29-31

a) The reward of Daniel, v. 29

The rewarding of Daniel indicates that the king accepted his interpretation of the writing, though the kingdom was within hours of its own demise.

b) The demise of Belshazzar, v. 30

That “very night” Belshazzar was murdered and the first great world empire, the golden head of the statue Nebuchadnezzar envisioned in a dream (chapter 2), faded into the silver of a new nation on the world-of-that-day scene.

The city of Babylon was deemed impregnable in its day, yet it fell in a night. It had two sets of double walls. The outer walls were seventeen miles in length and the inner walls were twenty-five feet wide and forty feet in height on which chariots could be employed. The weakness in the city was its water system. Nebuchadnezzar had the Euphrates diverted to run under the walls of the city. Cyrus, the Persian, whose army took the city by diverting the river into a nearby lake course, and were, thereby, able to walk into an undefendable city. The Persians timed the attack on the city the night of a festival. Upon entering the palace, the Persians found Belshazzar holding a dagger to take his own life. He was overpowered and executed.

c) The emergence of the Medo-Persian Empire, v. 31

Darius I, the Mede, became the head of the expanded empire, late in life (age 62).

Thoughts:

1. Is it not a tragedy when those appointed to preserve their subjects, creating national security so that peace and prosperity prevails, act with arrogance and self-interest? Belshazzar is an example of an empowered monarch at his worse. The record of the past shows the folly of being consumed in self-centeredness. Do we not know people like this in everyday life? Should it not trouble us that their end will be disappointment unless you and I seek to show them a better way of life?
2. We cannot tell when people cross the invisible line of judgment when repentance leading to forgiveness is no longer granted. Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar were egomaniacs; to one God caused him to repent and to the other to increased debauchery leading to death. You and I will never plumb the depths of the ways of God, but do you take time to praise him for bringing you to repentance and life.
3. Belshazzar was a person who did not understand that privilege should cause us to be grateful, humble, other-caring people. God allowed him enormous privileges but he presupposed that it was because of his own doing and generosity. The gifts of life should turn us to the Lord, but it more frequently leads us away from Him. Why do you think that is often true for all of us?
4. I find it is a truism that people seek to suppress their fears and inadequacies in the deceptive shroud in pleasure, success, and entertainment. Belshazzar found it in drunken orgies. Busyness is an American trait, as well as our penchant for pleasures, but it may be a cause of our emptiness and unfulfilled existence. We seem to long for peace and quiet, yet we are afraid that it will reveal to us the painful silence and emptiness of our lives. Do you know people like this? Does it not break your heart?
5. Trusting in one's education, career success, and accomplishments (even family and friends) as a source of security will ultimately bring only disappointment. Our fantasies, the toys that fill our garages, the hobbies that fill our empty days, will someday become things we can no longer pursue. When that time comes what will you do? I would argue that delight in the person and accomplishment of Jesus can fill your heart with peace, expectancy, and strength without end or diminuation.