

In Week 2, we discussed the importance of chapter 5 for the dating of the book of Daniel. Since we are now at chapter 5, a brief review is in order. Critical scholars have, historically, had a few problems with the person of Belshazzar. First, critical scholars scoffed at the existence of Belshazzar in Daniel 5 simply because he was not mentioned in any archeological evidence. That is, up until the 1850's (that would be 1550 years after Porphyry first proposed the Maccabean view), when four cylinders were found at the temple of the moon God in Ur. The text of one of the cylinders contains the inscription

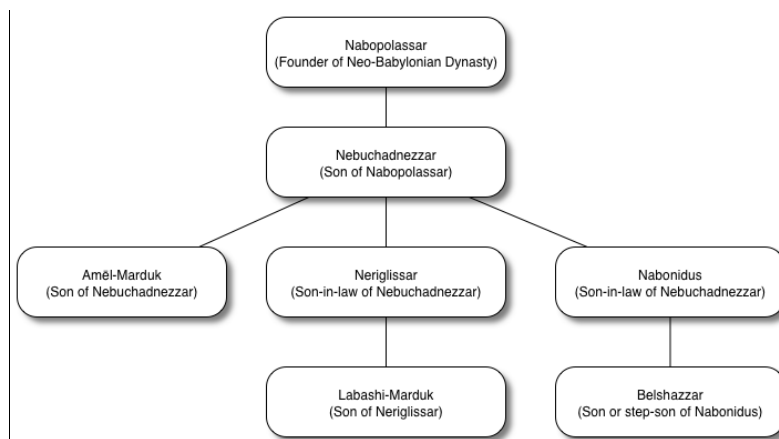
“for me, Nabonidus, king of Babylon, save me from sinning against your great godhead and grant me as a present a life long of days, and as for Belshazzar my firstborn son, my own child, let the fear of your great divinity be in his heart, and may he commit no sin; may he enjoy happiness in life.”

Since the time of this first discovery, more than three-dozen ancient texts have been found attesting to Belshazzar's existence. The second objection to Belshazzar was Daniel's title of him as the “king.” In another cuneiform text discovered in 1920, known as the Verse Account of Nabonidus, we note that Nabonidus went on a long journey, thus leaving Babylon, and that he entrusted his eldest son, the crown prince, with the kingship. Note that this inscription both again confirms the existence of Belshazzar and his kingship as acting king (second ruler). What was the trip that Nabonidus went on? In 555 BC Nabonidus led an army to quell a rebellion to the west of Babylon. Before leaving he entrusted the kingship of Babylon to his son Belshazzar. Since Nabonidus was fond of the desert, he constructed a royal palace in the city of Tema.



Since the king was fond of the Arabian desert, he settled there as king of Arabia and left Belshazzar to govern Babylon. There have been many Babylonian writings found since the discovery of Belshazzar that indicate he functioned as the real authority over Babylon.

This is indeed solid evidence of a 6th century BC author as Daniel mentions the reward for interpreting the writing on the wall in Dan. 5 was “third ruler in the kingdom.” It is also striking that no Greek author mentions Belshazzar in any writings, suggesting that he had been forgotten by the time of the Hellenistic period. Garland provides a helpful lineage diagram of the Kings of Babylon¹



¹ Tony Garland, Commentary on Daniel, www.spiritandtruth.org website.

Recall last week that one of the theories of who took over the regency during Nebuchadnezzar's illness was Amel-Marduk, the king's own son. Notice that Nabonidus was the son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar, having (most likely) married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters. Belshazzar was the son (according to the inscriptions above) of Nabonidus.

Another interesting fact is that Daniel decided to finish the historical narrative portions concerning the Gentile kingdoms that he served in and he put his personal visions in chapters 7-12, even though he had those visions during the Babylonian and Medo-Persian rule. If we look at the opening remarks by Daniel in chapters 7 and 8 (See Dan 7:1; 8:1), we understand that by the time of Belshazzar and the events in chapter 5, Daniel has already had the visions in chapter 7-8. Daniel was also familiar with the prophecies of Jeremiah. So, as chapter 5 opens, Daniel knows the following:

- The kingdom of Medo-Persia would overthrow Babylon (Isa. 45:1; Jer. 50:9; Jer. 51:11, 28-31; Dan. 2:32, 39; 7:5; 8:3-8, 20-21).
- Cyrus would initiate the Jew's release from Babylon and the temple's reconstruction in Jerusalem (Isa. 44:27-28; 45:1-5). This, in turn, implies Cyrus would gain ascendancy over Babylon—the nation holding the Jews captive.
- The overthrow of Babylon would enable Jews to return to Israel (Jer. 50:4-5, 8, 19, 28; 51:45).
- The reign of Babylon would end with Nebuchadnezzar's grandson (Jer. 27:6-7).
- The seventy years of servitude were nearing fulfillment (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10).

There are several other interesting tidbits concerning Daniel chapter 5. For example, why did Belshazzar isolate the articles from the Jewish temple to desecrate with his actions? The answer to this question likely lies in the historical context of Daniel 5.

First, the text explicitly says that Belshazzar knew of the happenings in Nebuchadnezzar's reign. He certainly knew of the image of the Gentile kingdoms in chapter 2, which meant he surely understood that the Medo-Persian empire would overthrow Babylonian empire. For that to happen, the capital city of Babylon would have to fall.

Second, several ancient documents depict the Medo-Persian army as having conquered the surrounding areas of Babylon by the time of the chapter five events. This could explain why so many officials were in Babylon the night it fell. They couldn't get out to go back to their own lands and cities. The very people whom God foretold would overtake the Babylonians were already encamped outside the city walls.

Third, Babylon was constructed by Nebuchadnezzar as, not only a royal palace and city, but an impenetrable fortress. The outer wall surrounding the city was so thick that no ancient hammers could knock the wall down. There was a second inner wall that made climbing over the walls an impossibility. Even if the Medo-Persian army could not break through the walls, how long could Babylon survive without food and water? Nebuchadnezzar solved this problem as well. He actually built the walls of the city overtop the Euphrates River. He also had enough storehouses to accumulate twenty years of food for the entire population of the city. In light of these preparations by the Babylonians, the people most likely laughed and mocked a possible siege of Babylon.

In light of all these historical and contextual factors, it seems quite apparent that Belshazzar's intent was to mock God for predicting that Babylon could be overthrown.

When exactly did the events of Daniel 5 occur? The events recorded in Daniel 5 occurred in the year 539 BC, some 24 years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar (563 BC) and about 30 years after the king's madness. Babylonian history tells us that after Nebuchadnezzar passed, the kingdom was plagued by governmental mismanagement, instability, and intrigue that spanned four separate administrations over those 24 years. Daniel chapter 5 picks up the history just before the fall of the Babylonian empire to the Medes and Persians. Garland also tables the rule after Nebuchadnezzar.

Let's look at the history depicted in this table. Nebuchadnezzar was the son of king Nabopolassar, the first king of the so-called Neo-Babylonian era. After Nebuchadnezzar died, shortly after the events of Daniel 4, Amel-Marduk his son ruled in his place for a brief time until he was assassinated by his step-brother Neriglissar. Nice family! Neriglissar apparently married one of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters. Neriglissar was killed in battle a few years later and was replaced by his son Labashi-Marduk. Here is where family business comes into the fray again. Nabonidus, who married another of Nebuchadnezzar's daughters, leads a revolt against Labashi-Marduk and kills him. Now Nabonidus is the king. Apparently Nabonidus did not enjoy being in Babylon, nor was he particularly fond of the Babylonian gods. So he puts Belshazzar in charge of the city of Babylon, which is the capital of the Babylonian empire. For all practical purposes, Belshazzar was king of Babylon at the time of Daniel 5.

Babylonian Rule after Nebuchadnezzar

Reign	Names	Relation	Length of Rule	End of Rule
605-562 B.C.	Nebuchadnezzar (Nebuchadrezzar, Nabuchodonosor)	Son of Nabopolassar	43 years	Death by illness
562-560 B.C.	Amēl-Marduk (Evil-Merodach 2K. 25:27; Jer. 52:31)	Son of Nebuchadnezzar	2 years	Murdered by brother-in-law (Neriglissar)
560-556 B.C.	Neriglissar (Neglissar, Nergal-shar-ušur)	Son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar	4 years	Killed in battle
556	Labashi-Marduk (Laborosoarchod, Labosordacus)	Son of Neriglissar	A few months	Murdered by conspirators led by Nabonidus
556-539	Nabonidus (Nabunaid)	Son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar by marriage?	17 years	Babylon falls to Medo-Persia (Dan. 5:31)
553/550-539 (coregent)	Belshazzar (Baltasar)	Grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, son or step-son of Nabonidus.	14/11 years	Babylon falls to Medo-Persia (Dan. 5:31)

The historical setting is succinctly summarized by Walvoord ...

Thanks to the Babylonian Chronicle, the date of Belshazzar's feast can be determined with a high degree of precision. The Chronicle states that on the sixteenth day of the month Tishri in Nabonidus's seventeenth year (Saturday, October 12, 539 B.C.) "the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without a battle." Herodotus notes that Babylon fell during a time of "festival" or celebration (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.191). This corresponds closely to Daniel's description of the fall happening the night Belshazzar (correction mine) held a "great feast for a thousand of his lords." (Dan. 5:1).²

Daniel 5:1

¹ Belshazzar the king held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand.

It was not unusual for the ancient Babylonians and Persians to throw very large feasts; indeed, most normal days the king ate with thousands of his rulers. This was commonplace in ancient times. But this is described as a great feast.

Why would Belshazzar hold a feast at this time ... with the armies of the Medo-Persians bearing down on the city? Perhaps to build morale among the people. It is also possible after the news of the defeat and flight of his father Nabonidus, Belshazzar quickly moved to proclaim himself king of the empire. The festival would be the celebration of his coronation as king. It is also possible the feast was a routine annual event that happen to fall during this time. Whether it was a birthday party, an annual event, or just a special gathering it is clear that there were many rulers here. Given that the Persians were at the gate, these rulers were not going anywhere.

The king certainly sat on an elevated platform or some kind much like the bride and groom at a wedding are front and center for all the guest to see them. The king was drinking wine seems to be the highlight of the story here. The implication was that if Belshazzar had not been drunk, he may have exercised a little better judgment in mocking the God of the Bible.

² Walvoord, John F., Daniel, Moody Publishers, Chicago, IL, 2012.

Daniel 5:2–4

² When Belshazzar tasted the wine, he gave orders to bring the gold and silver vessels which Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple which *was* in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God which *was* in Jerusalem; and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

It is most likely that when the text says Belshazzar tasted the wine ... and then gave the orders ... the implication was that he was certainly drunk. Montgomery comments

The king must have lost his sense of decency to commit what is to the Oriental view a sacrilege even with the holy things of another religion.³

It is safe to conclude that the king has become drunk and has lost his sense of sound judgment. This certainly was a factor in the king summoning the vessels from the temple. As we have previously mentioned, Belshazzar knew of the prophecy in Daniel 2. He also knew of the dealings of God with his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar; how God humiliated and dealt with his pride. He very likely knew of the additional visions that Daniel had in chapters 7 and 8. So his intent, though marred by alcohol, was to mock the God who supplied the divine prediction of the overthrow of Babylon.

Notice at least three abominations occur in this feast. First, drunkenness. Second, since concubines were mentioned, it is likely that eventually this feast would involve sexual immorality. Third, the crowd praised the gods of gold and silver ... clearly idolatry is happening as well. Now recall that in Babylonian religion, one nation could not overthrow another unless the nations gods were more powerful than the others. It had been almost 70 years since Babylon overthrew Israel. In Belshazzar's view, the continued possession of the temple vessels of Israel was a testament to the power of the Babylonian gods over Yahweh. The king no doubt viewed the impending advancement of the Persian army in this light as well, otherwise he would not be casually throwing a feast.

Again, it should be clearly understood why Belshazzar singled out the God of Israel for this blasphemy instead of the many other gods from foreign deities. Daniel tells us that the king knew and understood the history of God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar but he chose to ignore it. It is possible that during this feast the king desecrated articles of other religions as well, but Daniel just doesn't mention it.

In any event, it appears that this vile desire was brought on by the wine. How often otherwise clear-thinking men ponder evil in their hearts, and a little wine is all it takes for them to enact what they have desired. Well said is Proverbs 31:4 ... "It is not for kings to drink wine, not for princes intoxicating drink."

It is also interesting that the command was given for the gold and silver vessels to be brought, but only the gold was used. Perhaps merely because gold is more valuable to the Babylonians that the silver vessels were ultimately not used. Notice that the first verse says the nobles were invited but here the wives and concubines were present for the drinking. The wives and concubines may not have been present when the feast began but they have been brought in as the wine began to take effect among the rulers. This is also at least circumstantial evidence that eventually immorality was planned as the evening went on.

One other item is worth thinking through. It is noted that some of the vessels used in the temple service were so holy that only the Aaronic priests could handle and use them, the Levites could not even handle them as the penalty for even touching them was death (Num. 18:1–4). How was it then that Nebuchadnezzar's army could bring them from the temple to Babylon? The answer lies in the sovereign purposes of God. In judging the nation of Israel, God gave the vessels to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 1:2) ... "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God ..." To accomplish His purpose toward the nation of Israel, He allowed unholy hands of Gentiles to seize the vessels and place them in the temple of a false god of Babylon. And yet, during this entire 70 years, it appears that Nebuchadnezzar had shown respect to the vessels by not using them. All indications were that they remained in the temple for the entire time before Belshazzar summoned them. Unfortunately for Belshazzar, he picked the wrong place and time to get a belly full of wine.

The section ends with all the people raising their glasses in toasts to the gods of Babylon. Suddenly ...

³ Montgomery, J. A., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ICC, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979.