

“The king was on his throne,  
 The satraps filled the hall,  
 A thousand bright lamps shone,  
 At that high festival:  
 A thousand cups of gold,  
 In Judah deemed divine,  
 Jehovah’s vessels hold,  
 The godless heathen’s wine.

BYRON

Some additional information concerning the events of Daniel 5 is in order.

One additional aspect of the Babylonian religion which I did not mention as of yet is the “belief among the Babylonians that the decrees of the gods were written on the tablets of fate in heaven.” The fact that God used a hand to write on a wall to Belshazzar would have been significant to all in attendance.

Babylonian archives record the gathering of all the Babylonian idols by Nabonidus (Belshazzar’s father) into the city of Babylon. It is very likely that in the banquet hall itself stood all of these “treasures” from previous conquests. Boutflower remarks concerning the language that Daniel used to describe the festivities<sup>1</sup>

They drank wine, and, inflamed therewith, “praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone, which “ – in the words of Daniel – “ see not, nor hear, nor know.” So emphatic is the language that it makes us think that those very images of the gods, which, as just stated, Nabonidus had collected into Babylon, must have been in the room at the critical moment when “the King eternal, incorruptible, invisible, the only God,” saw fit to assert His supremacy ...

### Daniel 5:24–28

<sup>24</sup> Then the hand was sent from Him and this inscription was written out.

מנא מנא תקל פרס

<sup>25</sup> "Now this is the inscription that was written out: 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.' <sup>26</sup> "This is the interpretation of the message: 'MENE '-- God has **numbered** your kingdom and put an end to it. <sup>27</sup> "'TEKEL '-- you have been **weighed** on the scales and found deficient. <sup>28</sup> "'PERES '-- your kingdom has been **divided** and given over to the Medes and **Persians**."

The above is how the writing would have looked on the wall, again, the Aramaic words comprising this phrase were written on the wall without vowels. If we were to transcribe the characters into English equivalents ... we would have

**NISRPU LQT ANM ANM**

Which, when rendered to our left-to-right style would be

**MNA MNA TQL UPRSIN**

This gives us a feel for how the writing would have looked in English. Also remember that the writing would have been devoid of vowels (A, I, U are not vowels in Aramaic/Hebrew). Since Daniel provided the interpretation of the words by vocalizing their meaning (highlighted above), the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic texts put those vowels in place to agree with Daniels spoken rendering; so the Aramaic text would read as such

<sup>1</sup> Boutflower, Charles, *In and Around the Book of Daniel*, The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1923.

## מִנָּא מִנָּא תִּקֵּל וּפְרָסִין

Some expositors have suggested that, with a little different vowel choice, the cryptic message utilizes a play on words involving coins of relative value. In this case, the English wording would be mina, mina, shekel, half-mina. The final word is actually quite significant. It points to the word for Persians; Archer makes the case ...

Furthermore *p-r-s* also points to the word for “Persian,” *Pārās*. This means that the author of this Book of Daniel believed that the kingdom that followed right after the Babylonian (over which Belshazzar reigned) was the Persian, without any intervening, independent Median Empire. Nothing could be plainer, in the light of this triple wordplay, than that the author understood the Persians to be the dominant element in empire number two, with the Medians being associated with them as a federated nation.<sup>2</sup>

**MENE:** The first idea in the pronouncement upon Belshazzar is the verb “to number.” This would be the equivalent of the modern expression “His days are numbered ...” Given what happens to the king on this faithful night, it appears that, not only had the days of Belshazzar’s kingdom come to an end, but the days of the king himself have been numbered – he will be slain this very night. Daniel says that the kingdom is being put to an end, literally, “finished.” The wording here also has a hint of financial transactions and includes the idea of closing an account for failure of payment.

The Lord God used the nation of Babylon as a tool to judge the nation of Israel for its sins; however, now God is going to meter out judgment against the Babylonians for their sins. This was according to God’s prophetic plan recorded in Jeremiah ...

25<sup>12</sup>Then it will be when seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the LORD, 'for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.

27<sup>6</sup> "Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the wild animals of the field to serve him. <sup>7</sup>"All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings will make him their servant.

**TEKEL:** The verb here means “to weigh” and expresses the idea that Babylon, and the king himself, have been put upon the scales and are wanting, i.e., losing weight or value. That Belshazzar’s wickedness went well beyond getting drunk and doing stupid things is attested by Xenophon (Greek historian circa 390 BC). He relates two separate incidents that demonstrate the cruelty and barbarism of Belshazzar.

The first incident involved hunting with a friend, the son of Gobryas. He and the king went hunting. They came upon a bear, the king threw his spear and missed, the son of Gobryas killed the bear with his subsequent throw. Same thing happened on another occasion with a lion, the king missed and the son of Gobryas ended up killing the lion. Then Belshazzar took a spear and kill him out of jealousy.

On another occasion, at a royal banquet, Belshazzar castrated a man named Gadatas because one of his concubines found Gadatas attractive. The king is now about to reap what he has sown ... for the father of Gadatas had joined forces with Cyrus, who was waiting outside Babylon’s walls with his armies, to enact revenge for his son.

**PERES:** The wordplay here is noticed by many commentators. Peres, meaning “divided,” and “Persians” each have the same root consonants. Some commentators believe the notion of divided here is referring to the way that Babylon will be divided between the Medes and the Persians, but most see this verb as simply a way to convey “broken into pieces.” It is also interesting that the verbs in this section, (numbered, finished, weighed, and divided), are all perfect tense ... indicating that the coming action is so definite that Daniel portrays them in the past tense. From God’s perspective, these events have already happened.

What a sad end to a king, who is estimated to be only 35 or 36 years old; no doubt looking for many more years of life. How quickly his situation changed. How quickly judgment came from the hands of a holy God.

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<sup>2</sup> Archer, *Commentary on Daniel*

## Daniel 5:29–31

<sup>29</sup> Then Belshazzar gave orders, and they clothed Daniel with purple and *put* a necklace of gold around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he *now* had authority as the third *ruler* in the kingdom. <sup>30</sup> That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain. <sup>31</sup> So Darius the Mede received the kingdom at about the age of sixty-two.

Despite the horrible decree upon the king, he had the presence of mind, or he had sobered up enough, to dispense the promised rewards upon Daniel. Then the final chapter in the history of Babylon was written, Belshazzar the Chaldean was slain. Now what about all the other rulers of Babylon, and Daniel himself? We don't know what happened to all the other officials, but it may be that Cyrus knew that Daniel was not sympathetic to Belshazzar and that he had talents and abilities that would be useful to the Medio-Persian empire that was now to come on the scene; it is October 12, 539 BC.

### Historical Notes on the Fall of Babylon

Xenophon<sup>3</sup> records his understanding of the events ...

As the noise and tumult ensued, those within heard the uproar, and at the king's command to see what the matter was, some of them opened the gates and ran out. And when Gadatas and his men saw the gates open they dashed in in pursuit of the others as they fled back into the palace, and dealing blows right and left they came into the presence of the king; and they found him already risen with his dagger in his hand. And Gadatas and Gobryas and their followers overpowered him; and those about the king perished also, one where he had sought some shelter, another while running away, another while actually trying to defend himself with whatever he could. . . . And when day dawned and those in possession of the citadels discovered that the city was taken and the king slain, they surrendered the citadels too.

Anderson<sup>4</sup> mentions the 'table of Cyrus' ...

The principle record here . . . is "the Annalistic table of Cyrus," an inscription of which the transparent design is to represent his conquest of Babylon as the fulfilment of a divine mission, . . . According to this tablet, "Sippara was taken without fighting, and Nabonidus fled." This was on the 14th day of Tammuz (June-July); and on the 16th, "Gobryas and the soldiers of Cyrus entered Babylon without fighting." On the 3rd day of Marchesvan, that is, four months later (October-November), Cyrus himself arrived. Following this comes the significant statement: "The 11th day of Marchesvan, during the night, Gobryas was on the bank of the river. The son of the king died" ; or, as Professor Driver reads it, "Gubaru made an assault, and slew the king's son." . . . But who was this personage whose death was the occasion of a great national mourning and a State funeral? As the context shows clearly that "the king" referred to was not Cyrus, he can have been no other than Nabonidus; and as "the king's son" ...so frequently mentioned in the earlier fragments of the inscription and in the contract tablets, is admittedly Belshazzar, there is no reason whatever to doubt that it was he whose death and obsequies are here recorded.

Finally, Goldingay<sup>5</sup> stacks citations in mentioning ...

According to the Babylonian Chronicle, in the last year of Nabonidus's reign the New Year Festival was properly observed and the gods of other cities were brought into Babylon. "In the month of Teshrit, while Cyrus was attacking the Babylonian army at Opis on the Tigris, the people of Babylonia revolted, but he [Nabonidus] slew some of the people. On the fourteenth day, Sippar was taken without a battle. Nabonidus fled. On the sixteenth day [12 October] Ugbaru, the governor of Gutium, and the troops of Cyrus entered Babylon without battle. Afterwards Nabonidus was arrested when he returned to Babylon." Religious ceremonies were not interrupted. "On the third of Marcheswan [29 October], Cyrus entered Babylon and they waved branches before him. Peace settled on the city and Cyrus proclaimed peace to Babylon. Gubaru, his governor, appointed local governors in Babylon ... On the night of the eleventh of Marcheswan [6 November] Ugbaru died. On the . . . the . . . of the king died." (See *Ancient Near East Texts* 306; *Documents from Old Testament Times* 81-83; Grayson, *Chronicles*, 7; **according to one reading [cf. Driver], the king's son was killed.**)

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<sup>3</sup> Xenophon, *Cyropædia*, VII.5.28-30, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Daniel in the Critic's Den*, 27, 31, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 107.

## Daniel Chapter 5 Applications

- **Blinding Power of Idolatry** - Evidence of the living God is all around us (Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:20), yet throughout history men have suppressed the knowledge of God and followed after dead idols (Ps. 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Isa. 40:18-20; 42:17-18; 46:3-7; Jer. 10:2-11; Hab. 2:18-19; Acts 17:29-30; 19:24-28; Rev. 9:20-21). Belshazzar mocked God yet praised idols. This blindness continues in our day. As Paul told the people of Athens almost two thousand years ago, “[God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, ... (Acts 17:26–27a).
- **Failure to Learn** - After recounting how Belshazzar’s grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar, had been judged by God for his pride, Daniel states, “But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this.” (Dan. 5:22). This is the real “power of pride:” it interferes with our ability to learn. “The idea is, that we ought to derive valuable lessons from what has taken place in past times; that, from the events which have occurred in history, we should learn what God approves and what he disapproves; that we should avoid the course which has subjected others to his displeasure, and which has brought his judgments upon them.”
- **Liability of Guilt** - When the hand appeared and began writing on the wall, the King was greatly alarmed. His fear, no doubt, was partly due to the miraculous sight itself. But it seems he also had a sense of foreboding: his guilt and licentious lifestyle had placed him in a position of moral liability. Those who mock God and live like there is no tomorrow may *appear* bold and worry-free, but deep down inside, their conscience is keeping a ledger they cannot escape (Rom. 2:14-15). They *know* they have a sin debt—though they go to enormous lengths to suppress this truth. How much better to live life with a clear conscience, where one can walk in a position of peace and rejoice in God’s grace and reconciliation!
- **Perspective When the Ungodly Rule** - Job asks the age-old question: “Why do the wicked live [and] become old, Yes, become mighty in power?” (Job 21:7). While the ungodly, like Belshazzar, are in power, great patience is required by the people of God. **Our world view must be informed by Scripture so we are convinced God’s justice will ultimately prevail.** “Hence we may seek consolation, when we see tyrants rushing on so impetuously, and indulging their lust and cruelty without moderation. When, therefore, they rush on, as if they would mingle heaven and earth, let us remember this instruction; their years are numbered! God knows how long they are to rage; He is not deceived; He knows whether it is useful to the Church and his elect, for tyrants to prevail for a time. By and bye he will surely restrain them, but since he determined the number of their days from the beginning, the time of his vengeance is not yet quite at hand, while he allows them a little longer to abuse without restraint the power and the sway which he had divinely granted them.” “A record of these events would encourage the exiles by reminding them that all of the oppressive forces that the nation would experience during the times of the Gentiles would only be allowed to assert themselves for a limited duration. Each oppressive empire would only be allowed to stay in power for a specific amount of time.”
- **Destiny of Godly vs. Ungodly** - “Only two letters are different in the names Belshazzar (the king) and Belteshazzar (Daniel). The life of the king was cut short, while the life of the prophet was extended, so that he outlived several Babylonian kings and served in the Medio-Persian court as well as the Babylonian court. But the difference between Belshazzar and Belteshazzar is not in the spelling of their names; the difference is in their relationship to God. Belshazzar resisted and rejected the grace of God and the revelation which he was given through history and the prophet Daniel. Belshazzar reaped the wrath of God. Belteshazzar, Daniel, trusted in God and served Him faithfully. Daniel believed, obeyed, and proclaimed God’s Word, and lived on. Not only did Daniel live long in this world, but he will live forever in the kingdom of God. May you not be like Belshazzar but like Belteshazzar.”
- **God Provides Revelation and Understanding to Believers** - “Daniel 5 reinforces and brings to a climax a theme from Daniel 2 and 4: God reveals mysteries to his people that unbelievers cannot understand.” As believers, we have an understanding of spiritual realities—how circumstances and events form part of God’s plan **as revealed within the Scriptures.** Non-believers don’t understand these things. Even if they do happen to read the Bible, without a change of heart, their minds remain blinded to what God has revealed (Job 12:24; Mat. 11:20, 25; John 9:39-41; Rom. 11:7-8; 2Cor. 3:14; 2Cor. 4:4).