

Recall the context of Daniel 5 from last week ... thanks to some extra-biblical citations, we know that the Persian army was already surrounding the city of Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian empire. Nabonidus, Belshazzar's father, has already been defeated outside the city and has fled. Belshazzar is fairly confident that the invading armies will not breach the walls of Babylon and there is plenty of food and water to outlast the Persians for some twenty years. The king is drinking wine with a 1000+ guests and he calls for the Jewish articles to be brought in from the temple treasury house. Most likely these consisted of goblets used in the temple worship in Jerusalem. The king begins to drink toasts to the Babylonian gods with the Jewish temple articles.

Suddenly ...

Daniel 5:5–6

⁵ Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. ⁶ Then the king's face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him, and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

Interesting the verse begins with "Suddenly." The Hebrew word used here means simply "a brief period of time." Some translations render it "In the same hour," others "Immediately," and still others "Suddenly." However we translate this word, it is reminiscent of the speed in which Belshazzar's grandfather Nebuchadnezzar was judged for his "is this not Babylon ..." soliloquy. Garland comments that "in both cases, the judgment is clearly connected to a 'trigger,' a particular extreme action beyond which God no longer patiently endures sin."

What is the significance of mentioning that the man's hand was writing opposite the lampstand (near the lampstand)? When is the most likely time of day that this celebration was being held? Probably at night. Nothing good happens at night. There would have certainly been torches to provide light for the occasion, but think about how much light there is around the typical campfire. Not near enough light to read well. But this hand was writing near the lampstand ... no doubt so everyone there could see what was happening. We have mentioned the plaster wall that was written on and the archeological finds that attest to this event in the life of the Babylonian empire. The point is, the king saw the hand doing the writing, it was in plain view by the lampstand.

The text then says the king's face grew pale, i.e., he turned ghost white! Quite a turn from the confident calm drunken king to a scared little man. The appearance of the hand would have freaked out everyone on face value, but here the king must realize that this hand had something to do with the Persian army just outside the walls of Babylon. Perhaps Belshazzar already knew that this was not a good omen. His thoughts began to trouble him and he began to manifest the signs of real panic. His face lost all its blood, and the joints of his hips were loosened ... which I take as a fancy way of saying he was so scared he could not continue to stand up. I have always wondered what the meaning of "his knees knocked together." I have yet to find a good explanation for this. Perhaps it just means he was shaking so hard from fear that his knees knocked together. It was now time to call in the feckless wise men of Babylon, whom we know will not be able to interpret the writing. This is becoming the standard for the book of Daniel. The wise men fail, Daniel comes to the rescue.

Daniel 5:7–9

⁷ The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me shall be clothed with purple and *have* a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third *ruler* in the kingdom." ⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed.

Let's set the scene ... everyone is watching this hand write on the wall, the king is shaking uncontrollably, and the whole place is silent ... you can hear a pin drop. The king finally breaks the silence and calls aloud for the wise men. Here we are unsure how much time took place but it is most likely some of the wise men were actually at the party and saw the writing. Nevertheless, the wise men are presented to the king and he immediately tells of all the rewards for the one who can read the writing. The rewards were clothing fit for royalty. Typically purple was the color worn by people of high rank.

There is also the gold chain placed around the neck and we have already mentioned the significance of gold in the Babylonian kingdom. We also most likely take that this was not simply a gold chain, but it very well had ornaments attached to it or medallions included to show the wearers position in the kingdom. The last reward for reading and interpreting the writing was to be granted the third ruler in the kingdom. Recall that the offer of third ruler was a mystery for many hundreds of years until the discovery of the beautiful Nabonidus Cylinder. From this cylinder comes the famous Verse Account of Nabonidus where we read that Belshazzar was the ruler in Babylon while Nabonidus was away on a journey. Translators are divided over whether Daniel was offered to be the third highest ruler (behind Nabonidus and Belshazzar) or if he was to be one of three rulers with equal authority. Most would see the evidence leaning toward the archeological finds, placing Belshazzar under Nabonidus as a secondary in rank rather than as an equal peer.



Here is where things get a little curious. The text says the wise men could not read the inscription. How is that possible? The writing was in Aramaic as attested to in verses 25-28. How do we explain how a Babylonian could not read Aramaic? According to Jewish tradition, the letters were written vertically instead of horizontally. This is probably not enough for the wise men to be unable to read the words. Some expositors suggest that the characters written by the hand were shaped in an unusual manner so that the Babylonians could not cognize the characters that made up the words. Again, this seems unlikely. There is one explanation that seems to make sense. Like Hebrew, the Aramaic language does not write the vowels with the consonants. This could have made the determining of the exact words ambiguous, especially if the words made a prophetic phrase in an unusual arrangement that needed interpretation.

The wise man could not read or interpret the writing on the wall, just as they could not tell or interpret the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar. This just makes the king more afraid of the contents of the writing and his face is now even paler than before. Furthermore, all the nobles are perplexed by this writing as well. There is confusion and no one knows what to do now.

Until the queen comes in ...

Daniel 5:10–12

¹⁰ The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale. ¹¹ "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. ¹² "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."

Now who is the queen that comes into the banquet hall? It could not have been one of Belshazzar's wives as the text explicitly says the kings' wives were already in attendance. Yet this queen must have held quite a high rank to just come into the banquet hall uninvited. For these reasons, most expositors since the time of Josephus (first century A.D.) believe that this was actually the queen-mother; who would have been either the wife of Nebuchadnezzar or possibly the wife of Nabonidus. Garland summarizes another view ...

Some take the queen of Daniel 5 as the Babylonian queen Nitocris. But there is a lack of consensus as to whose queen Nitocris was. She has been variously identified as: the wife of Nebuchadnezzar, the wife of Evil-Merodach, the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and wife of Nabonidus, and the mother of Nabonidus. It seems that all that can be said with certainty concerning Nitocris is she was a Babylonian queen whose identity remains uncertain.

Whose ever wife this was,

“this woman displayed firsthand information concerning the affairs of Nebuchadnezzar that would not have been known by a younger wife of Belshazzar, and she seems to have observed Daniel’s ministry in Nebuchadnezzar’s court.”¹

SO, the queen apparently heard the commotion in the banquet hall and came in ... or perhaps someone came and told her what was happening. Most likely she heard what the king and nobles were saying about the matter so she already knew what she was going to do. First, she addresses the king in a respectful manner. How often times in a man’s life when he goes off the deep end it takes a woman to straighten him out! She displays a calm demeanor and tries to settle him down.

Here is where things get interesting. The queen informs the king that there is a man in the kingdom who has “a spirit of the holy gods” in him. Not exactly an apt description of a prophet of God, but these are the exact terms that Nebuchadnezzar himself used to describe Daniel in the previous chapter (Dan. 4:8, 9, 18). The description must have stuck. This is why I tend to lean toward the queen here being Nebuchadnezzar’s wife. Pure speculation though ...

The queen reviews Daniel’s qualifications and how he came to be appointed to such a high position in Nebuchadnezzar’s court, even above all the wise men of Babylon. The fact that the queen refers to Daniel by his Hebrew name suggests a more intimate familiarity with the person and ministry of Daniel. It is postulated that Belshazzar was not personally acquainted with Daniel since it has been 20+ years since the death of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel does not seem to be serving in the present king’s court. If Daniel was, say, 15 when Nebuchadnezzar took him to Babylon (605 BC), then in 539 BC he would have been 81 years old. He probably went into semi-retirement after the death of Nebuchadnezzar (he would have been in his mid 60’s).

The queen said Daniel had an excellent spirit within him. This character trait made him stand out during the years of Nebuchadnezzar, during this single evening occurrence with Belshazzar, and certainly with the new incoming Medio-Persian administration (see Dan. 6:3). Her list of gifts was as follows: knowledge, insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems. Quite a list of qualities. The queen then gives her advice, again, suggesting that the queen was just not another of his wives but was held in high regard in being able to express her opinion in a public forum before the king. The stage has now been set for Daniel himself to arrive on the scene.

Daniel 5:13–16

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the exiles from Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?" ¹⁴ "Now I have heard about you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that illumination, insight and extraordinary wisdom have been found in you. ¹⁵ "Just now the wise men *and* the conjurers were brought in before me that they might read this inscription and make its interpretation known to me, but they could not declare the interpretation of the message. ¹⁶ "But I personally have heard about you, that you are able to give interpretations and solve difficult problems. Now if you are able to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to me, you will be clothed with purple and *wear* a necklace of gold around your neck, and you will have authority as the third *ruler* in the kingdom."

Daniel is most likely awakened from sleep (being 80+ and party in Babylon going on) and brought before the king. Interesting how the king first addresses Daniel, solidifying the view that he was not personally acquainted with him. “Are you that Daniel ...” The real question is whether the king is now trying to probe Daniel to see if he was really one of the Jews brought by his father, Nebuchadnezzar, from Judah. Why would he be interested in WHERE Daniel is from, rather than simply that he can interpret the writing on the wall? Well, think about the setting ... what did Belshazzar just do with his guests at the feast? He just desecrated the temple vessels from the God of the Jewish temple! There was probably a little bit of fear in asking this question concerning Daniel’s identity. “Are you Jewish? Nuts, sorry about the desecration of your God’s temple articles.”

Then it appears that the king tries to “butter” Daniel up with compliments. He explains the situation; the wise men were brought in but they have been unable to interpret the writing on the wall. He applies a second coat of “butter,” ... “I personally have heard about you, that you are able to solve difficult problems.” Then the king reiterates the rewards for successful interpretation. Ironic that the king that did not even personally know Daniel, is now wanting Daniel to provide answers to him. When a powerful ruler gets in a pickle, he always looks for someone else to bail him out of a predicament that he probably is responsible for in the first place.

¹ Miller, Stephen R., Daniel, in The New American Commentary, B&H Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1994.

Daniel 5:17–21

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Keep your gifts for yourself or give your rewards to someone else; however, I will read the inscription to the king and make the interpretation known to him. ¹⁸ "O king, the Most High God granted sovereignty, grandeur, glory and majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your father. ¹⁹ "Because of the grandeur which He bestowed on him, all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language feared and trembled before him; whomever he wished he killed and whomever he wished he spared alive; and whomever he wished he elevated and whomever he wished he humbled. ²⁰ "But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and *his* glory was taken away from him. ²¹ "He was also driven away from mankind, and his heart was made like *that of* beasts, and his dwelling place *was* with the wild donkeys. He was given grass to eat like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he recognized that the Most High God is ruler over the realm of mankind and *that* He sets over it whomever He wishes.

Daniel basically rejects the rewards that Belshazzar is offering. Perhaps at Daniel's age, none of those rewards seems as appealing as a warm blanket lol ... or Daniel may have been so disgusted by the desecration of the temple vessels that he wanted no part of the king's offer, though he surely was going to give the interpretation of the writing. However, in the end, Daniel accepted the gifts from the king. This may have been Daniel's introduction to the new rule that would come in from the Persians. If Daniel was now the third ruler in the kingdom, and Nabonidus was gone, and Belshazzar was dead, the Persians would look to Daniel to secure a peaceful transition of power.

Daniel then begins his interpretation of the writing with a historical summary of the present situation. Daniel explains the Belshazzar that it was God Almighty that gave his father Nebuchadnezzar his splendor throughout his reign. God gave him his rule, but (in verse 20), he became proud (or he was always proud) and he "behaved arrogantly." Daniel reviews what happened to Nebuchadnezzar in the madness that afflicted him and reviewed how he was restored after "he recognized that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind ..." and it is He that gives that rule and takes it away ... and He is about to take it away from Belshazzar.

Daniel now explains why the king is now in his current predicament ...

Daniel 5:22–23

²² "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, ²³ 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 your ways, you have not glorified.

"You have not humbled your heart ..." is the charge against Belshazzar. What Daniel is in fact saying is the Belshazzar SHOULD have humbled his heart on account of what happened to Nebuchadnezzar! How often it is that case that rulers seldom learn from their predecessors' mistakes and often continue in arrogance without restraint. We have an anemic lack of humility in all branches of our government and our country is no different than the rest of the world. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar did not learn his lesson and repent. Daniel explains why Belshazzar's sin is so egregious, because he knew all that happened to Nebuchadnezzar ... and further, he knew that Nebuchadnezzar eventually repented of his pride and arrogance and acknowledged the Most High God. The charge is pride, and more importantly, willful pride. He knew all these things ... yet did not repent.

Indeed, instead of humbling himself before the Lord God, Belshazzar exulted himself above "the Lord of heaven." His demonstration of this arrogance was on display when he ordered the vessels to be brought in from the temple treasury. And he led all his wives, concubines, and nobles to join in on his pride. Seems to agree with Paul's understanding of when a country rejects the Lord God ... Romans 1:32 ... "although they know the ordinances of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

The charges have been set. Now Daniel gets at the heart of the matter. God is the one who sustains the king's very life; He sustains the rulership that He has bestowed on the king; and Belshazzar in return has failed to even acknowledge and worship the God who is about to remove him from his post.

Next week (... or in 2 weeks) ... we will look at the writing, finish chapter 5, and summarize the applications and lessons learned.