

DANIEL

Chapter 5 -Notes

Summary

- Belshazzar holds a great feast with all of his nobles, likely in a last-ditch effort to please the gods and encourage them to show favor in light of the looming Persian threat. He calls for the vessels of the temple to be brought out so that they may be used in their revelry. He and his guests begin to praise the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. This prompts Yahweh to respond by sending forth a hand to write a riddle upon the wall, which pronounces God's judgement against Belshazzar and the removal of the kingdom from him. Daniel is rewarded for interpreting the riddle, Belshazzar is killed that same night, and the kingdom of Babylon is given to the Medes and Persians.

Reason for Writing

- This story is told by Daniel and compiled as a piece in the greater on-going story of the book of Daniel, which seeks to establish Yahweh as the one true God who possesses all true power and dominion, even over gentile nations and kings. In this story, Daniel reinforces that God is ever-present, never forgetting, always watching, always governing, and always active. He appoints nations and kings and peoples, and He expects obedience and faithfulness to Him and Him alone. The question, since the days of King David, continues to arise, "who may rule on God's behalf," and "where is the true king?"

Important Historical Notes

- Belshazzar is the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, and he is actually ruling over the kingdom as coregent, while his actual father is away worshipping false gods.

- Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, is the third ruler since Nebuchadnezzar, and he actually usurped the throne and took it.
- The Medes and Persians were a closely related people to the east of Babylon.
Historically, the Medes were the recognized power, and the Persians were little known by name, except as a vassal territory to the Medes.
- By this time, a Persian king named Cyrus, who's grandfather (mother's father) was the king of Media, had "peacefully" conquered Media and his grandfather, and absorbed them into the upstart Persian kingdom. He sought to conquer Babylon and absorb them as well.
- Belshazzar was a poor leader, and it's believed that his army had already been destroyed by Cyrus. Thus, at the time of this feast, Cyrus was probably already on the way to take the city. Perhaps this explains why Belshazzar had commanded all his nobles to come in for a feast. He was likely trying to stir his gods to respond favorably and deliver them.
- Historical records from the Persians speak of their taking of the city as being very easy. They record that they found the city in the midst of great revelry, and had little opposition.
- It's believed by many scholars that "Darius the Mede" is also "Cyrus the Persian." Same man, different names associated with different aspects of his lineage and kingdom.

A Note on Hebrew and Aramaic Language

- Hebrew and Aramaic are consonantal languages, meaning that they traditionally do not use vowels in their written forms. Every word is a three letter root word, and its meaning morphs and changes, depending on its pronunciation and the vowels that are applied to the consonants.

- Thus, the riddle written upon the wall in the story was likely difficult to discern, without any context. Moreover, we note that the different forms of the words and their usage are all contributing to the total meaning of the riddle (more on the riddle later).

The Great Feast

- The text literally says that Belshazzar “made a great bread feast.” Later, it’ll call it a great “drinking feast.” The elements of bread and wine are central to the imagery. Add to this the usage of the vessels of the temple, and we are made to think of this feast as a counterfeit to the feasting that took place in the temple. Rather than using the vessels to feast before Yahweh, worshipping Him, they are feasting before and worshipping the gods of gold, silver, bronze, Iron, wood and stone (materials also associated intimately with the temple).
- Looking forward, we can also see this is a counterfeit “Lord’s Supper.” We have warnings around not partaking “unworthily” lest we eat and drink judgement upon ourselves (1 Cor. 11:29-30). Here Belshazzar has done just that.
- In Numbers 5, we’re given the protocol for how to deal with a suspected adulterous woman. She is to bring bread before the Lord in the Tabernacle, the priest was to write curses upon a scroll, and that would then be washed off into a cup of water. She was then required to drink the cup. If she was guilty of adultery, the curses would take effect and “her loins would be undone.” Similarly here, Belshazzar has prepared a great bread feast, and drank wine. Upon his drinking, judgements are pronounced by God against him because of his adultery with other gods. We can see how these principals are carried and interwoven into other warnings, such as the Lord’s supper, where we are warned not to

partake unworthily (out of unfaithfulness to Christ), lest we eat and drink judgement upon ourselves.

- Vv. 5 makes mention of a lampstand being present. Most scholars agree that this is almost certainly the lampstand from the temple. That lampstand, the Bible tells us, was made in the image of an almond tree. Almond tree's were called "watcher trees," due to the fact that they were the first to bloom (so they watched over the other trees), and because the word for almond and watcher share the same three letter root. Moreover, the function of the lampstand in the temple was to represent God "watching over" the people of Israel, who were represented in the loaves of bread across from it upon the table in the temple. Interestingly, then, we see another type of "watcher" observing Belshazzar's actions and then acting to pronounce judgement on him, much like the watcher and Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4.

The Riddle

- Mene: A term that meant "reckoned," or "valuated." In other words, it was a word you might use to say that you had ascribed a value to something. "Numbered" might be an appropriate translation in some senses, but it's not particularly helpful here. It was also used to refer to a particular unit of measurement for gold and silver, 60 shekels.
 - Interpretation: The common translation for vv. 26 in most English Bibles is possible, but not technically correct. It should be, "God reckoned (determined the value) your kingdom and paid it out." In other words, God set the value of Babylon and then gave it to you. The value is 60 shekels, corresponding to mene.
- Tekel: This term means "weighed," but it also is used to denote 1 shekel.

- Interpretation: “You (Belshazzar) have been weighed, and found lacking.” In other words, God set the value of Babylon at 60 shekels and then it was given to Belshazzar. However, God set Belshazzar on the scales to see if he was sufficient to balance the scales and rule the weighty kingdom, but he was not. He weighed just 1 shekel!
- Peres: This is simply the singular form of “upharsin.” This term refers to half a mene, or 30 shekels. It is also used to mean, “divide,” or “assess.”
 - Interpretation: “the kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” In other words, the Medes and Persians, a newly unified kingdom of two groups, are receiving the kingdom of Babylon. They are 30 shekels each in weight, and together they are worthy of inheriting the 60-shekel kingdom of Babylon.
- *RECKON! 60 SHEKELS, 1 SHEKEL, 30 SHEKELS*
 - *Determined: Valued, Weighed, Divided*
 - Babylon was ascribed a high value and paid out to Belshazzar.
 - Belshazzar was evaluated and determined insufficient for ownership.
 - Babylon will be given to the split kingdom of Media and Persia.

Christ in the Text

- In chapter 5 we see Daniel serve as a type of Christ, as he faithfully rebukes those who should have known better and ruled in faithfulness to Yahweh. Just as Christ calls out the failed and adulterous leaders of his day, and declares their pending judgement, so too does Daniel boldly stand before Belshazzar. Moreover, we are reminded that Christ is the only man/king who has been weighed and found sufficient to inherit the gifts of God.

Application Points

- Christ reigns and rules over all nations now. Every nation, king, government, and people are expected to honor Him, lest He become angry and remove them.
- God's people should have a care for the souls of our leaders, and call them boldly to faithfulness, no matter the cost.
- God's people should not pursue power for power's sake, but like Daniel, we should not eschew it when it is granted to us. It may be given to us so that we might come to bless God's people, as Daniel will get opportunity to do now under Cyrus.