

THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

Daniel 5:1-31

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Introduction

When a coach's contract is up for renewal and the season's record stands at two wins and ten losses, the fans whisper: "The handwriting is on the wall." Most likely, the imagery for the idiom comes from Daniel 5, where a hand—likely the hand of God—writes on the wall. The book of Daniel does not deal with each and every Babylonian king. Our previous saga (chapter 4) dealt with King Nebuchadnezzar. Many kings, however, have come and gone between Nebuchadnezzar and his maternal grandson, Belshazzar, who takes center stage today.

Belshazzar's Banquet (5:1-4)

According to ancient historians (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.192; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.5.15-25) this banquet occurred in October 539 B.C. Just two days prior to the banquet, the Persians had conquered Opis, modern Baghdad, which was located just fifty miles north of Babylon. According to the Nabonidus Chronicle, moreover, King Nabonidus (father of and co-king with Belshazzar) himself had fled. Belshazzar exhibits his bravado by drinking himself under the table under the gaze of a thousand pairs of eyes.

With the Persian army on the prowl, what could possibly be the meaning of such a riotous banquet? Why would Belshazzar throw a big banquet on a perilous night (the eve of Babylon's fall) like this?

Several theories have been proposed, but there is no real way to know.

(1) Perhaps Belshazzar was still hopeful that Babylon might win the battle. Therefore, a celebration might be an encouragement, a confidence builder for the Babylonians.

(2) Following his father's (Nabonidus) defeat and resulting flight, Belshazzar was throwing a feast to declare himself the one and only king. In this light, the feast was the coronation of the king. The fact that a thousand noblemen showed up for the party might well be evidence of such a royal occasion.

(3) The ancient author Xenophon indicates that the Babylonians were, in fact, observing a customary festival that simply happened to fall at this time (*Cyropaedia* 7.5.15). This explanation seems most plausible, as the Persians would have readily taken advantage of the festival season as an opportune time to strike. According to Xenophon, during the festive time "the citizens drink and make merry the whole night long."

Unfortunately, Belshazzar crossed a line when he called for the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had removed from Jerusalem. The temple vessels were the only tangible remains of Israel's religion. The prophet Isaiah had already made clear that the purity of these vessels was paramount. In Isaiah 52:11 we read, "Depart, depart, go out from here, touch nothing unclean; go

out of the midst of her, purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of the Lord.” Profaning the holy vessels from the Jerusalem temple, therefore, was an outrageous act, even for a man with pagan principles. The vessels represented both the power and presence of God. As one biblical scholar explains, “Belshazzar’s heart was a factory of rebellion against God.”

The word “father” is a broad term for “ancestor” (forefather) and could easily indicate “grandfather,” as was, most likely, the case. Belshazzar did what his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, would never have dared to do even in his worst moments. This was no act of ignorance, moreover, for the king both knew where the vessels were kept and from whence they had come. The proverbial sage wrote, “Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty” (Proverbs 18:12). Going beyond sacrilege, Belshazzar toasted his gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone as he drank from the holy goblets.

On the eve of his destruction, Belshazzar specifically chose to challenge and blaspheme the God of Israel rather than the countless other foreign deities which could have been defamed. In the third year of Belshazzar’s reign, interestingly enough, Daniel had prophesied Babylon’s fall to the Persians (8:1-4, 15-20). Isaiah, moreover, had prophesied by name, Cyrus, the Persian king, 150 years before he conquered Babylon (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1). Was Belshazzar aware of these prophecies and, thus, challenging the very God who predicted his defeat?

Handwriting on the Wall (5:5-6)

Modern excavations have uncovered the palace complex, including what may well be the room referenced in Daniel 5. The throne room of the kings of Babylon was excavated by Robert Koldewey in 1899. There is enough evidence left to demonstrate that the walls were coated with white gypsum, an indication that any wall writing would be clearly displayed.

While we are not told explicitly the source of the “fingers” and “hand,” we can be quite sure that they are a symbol for the presence of God. In Exodus 31:18, God’s fingers wrote the Ten Commandments (cf. Deuteronomy 9:10). And don’t forget the response of the Egyptian magicians after the acts of the plagues, as they remarked, “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19). Finally, the psalmist declared the heavens themselves are the work of God’s fingers (Psalm 8:3).

In verse 6, we learn that the once confident king was now terribly frightened: his face grew white; his mind went mad; his knees started knocking; and his bodily functions were beyond his control (his hip joints went slack).

The Say-less Sages (5:7-9)

By now, the reader of Daniel is well-familiar with the “know nothing” Chaldean conjurers. In chapter 2, the Babylonian diviners were inept when it came to handling Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. In chapter 4, the kingdom’s wise men failed, yet again, in dealing with the king’s dreams. This third occurrence, therefore, reminds the reader that the wise men of Babylon were simply called forth to be failures, as the story points to the real wise man, Daniel. To the one able to make known the meaning of the divine message, the king promises three great gifts: a garment of purple, a necklace of gold, and a position of priority—third in command in the kingdom (Nabonidus and Belshazzar occupied the first two places of power). While all the gifts signified royal wealth, they were completely useless in a city about to be under siege.

Enter the Queen (5:10-12)

For the queen to enter bravely without invitation (cf. Esther 4:11) is an indication that this was most likely more than just another one of the king's wives. In fact, the text states that the wives were already present (v. 2). Most commentators since the time of Josephus (88 A.D.) have identified her as "the queen-mother," meaning either the wife of Nebuchadnezzar or the wife of Nabonidus. Of the alternatives available for the identification of the queen-mother, Nebuchadnezzar's wife Nitocris seems to be the most probable person. Herodotus, the Greek historian, in fact, celebrates her wisdom. Whoever she is, the queen-mother had a long memory that spanned decades, not just days.

Daniel himself was, by now, quite old and, seemingly, almost a forgotten figure. The queen not only remembered Daniel, but was quite confident that he would be able to solve the mystery of the words on the wall. Reminiscent of chapter 4 (vs. 8-9, 18), the queen declared that Daniel possessed "a spirit of the holy gods." Daniel, however, clarified that the spirit was from the Most High God (v. 18; cf. 2:28). Daniel's accolades from the queen-mother were numerous. He was said to have insight, intelligence, wisdom, a keen mind, understanding, and the ability to interpret dreams (v. 12).

Belshazzar's Offer (5:13-16)

Even in his state of shock, the king had not lost his arrogance. Belshazzar reminded Daniel that he was nothing more than a Chaldean captive, an exile from Judah. The mere mention of Daniel's exilic existence in Babylon placed Daniel in an adversarial role to the Babylonian kingdom. With a masterful stroke, our writer echoes back to the golden goblets. As the goblets were "brought from Jerusalem" (a combination of verses 2 and 3), so was Daniel "brought from Judah" (v. 13).

The king offered Daniel the same rewards he had offered the Babylonian diviners. But they were available to Daniel only "if he was able" to read the inscription and make its interpretation known to the king. Telling Daniel, in whom the spirit of the Most High dwells, "if you can," heightens the tension and prepares us for Daniel's bold response.

Daniel Declines (5:17)

Though Daniel had dealt with megalomaniacal monarchs before, his tone was terser when he spoke to Belshazzar compared to his communication with Nebuchadnezzar (4:19, 27). Obviously, Daniel did not miss the barb from the king's demeaning comments. While Daniel always conversed with Nebuchadnezzar with a tone of respect—even when he had to deliver bad news—Daniel was to-the-point with this second-rate monarch.

First, Daniel refused the gifts. Daniel would not be a paid-for prophet. Any misconception that God's pronouncements could be paid for with positions of power, purple garments, or pendants of gold, must surely be rejected. Refusing the payoff, Daniel was free from any obligation to appease the king.

Remembering Nebuchadnezzar (5:18-24)

These verses retell the contents found in chapter 4. The overarching difference between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar is the latter's refusal to repent. Only here in verse 21 are we told that Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation involved living with the "wild donkeys." Chapter 4 made it clear that he had been driven away from humankind (4:33) and began eating grass like cattle. No mention, however, was made of donkeys.

The main message emerges in verse 22: Belshazzar refused to humble himself, despite the fact that he knew about Nebuchadnezzar's story of humiliation and restoration. There are two ways to learn life's lessons. First, you can pay your own tuition, learning from your own losses. Following this paradigm, one refuses to learn from the faults of others and, thus, repeats all the mistakes of mankind. An alternative way to mastering wisdom is to allow others to pay the tuition by learning from their mistakes and mishaps.

Belshazzar had every opportunity to learn from the destruction that had been caused by Nebuchadnezzar's proud heart. Despite knowing his grandfather's story, Belshazzar refused humble repentance. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naive go on and are punished for it." Likewise, Proverbs 18:15 says, "The mind of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge." Finally, Proverbs 1:8 says, "Hear, my son, your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." Refusing to learn from the failures of his forefather, Belshazzar was doomed to repeat the tragedies of the past.

Daniel's Interpretation (5:25-29)

Given the ease of reading the words written on the wall, surely the problem with the Chaldean counselors was not their inability to simply read the message but, rather, an inability to interpret and understand the meaning of the message. From the text, we can see that we have three different nouns, units of measure or money. Daniel had the gift, however, to see past what was written to proclaim what was prophesied. Daniel re-interprets these nouns as verbal forms. Therefore, the message is clear: numbered, weighed, and divided. Old Testament scholar John Goldingay offers an alternative interpretation with much the same meaning: appointed, evaluated, and punished. Therefore, MENĒ means to be numbered (cf. Psalm 90:10-12), and it's most likely mentioned twice as to make the message emphatic. TEKĒL means to be weighed. Here it is used in the sense of judgment (cf. 1 Samuel 2:3; Job 31:6). Belshazzar has been weighed by God and found wanting when compared to the repentance of Nebuchadnezzar. PERĒS means to be divided. The kingdom, therefore, would be shattered.

Interestingly enough, the word peres has the same consonants (remember, only consonants are written in both Aramaic and Hebrew scripts) as the Aramaic term that would be translated Persians. Therefore, even the handwriting on the wall includes a wordplay hinting that the kingdom would be destroyed by the Persian army.

(We, too, have been weighed and found wanting.)

The Fall of Babylon (5:29-31)

Though Daniel had previously indicated he would not be willing to receive the rewards (v. 17), he, surprisingly, does not refuse the gifts once granted. Previously, he refused the gifts so as not to

compromise his clear message. If the king, however, insisted on giving the gifts following Daniel's delivery of the uncompromised message, then so be it. Most likely, Belshazzar insists on giving Daniel the gifts in hopes of leveraging God's mercy. In reality, the rewards were somewhat worthless at best, and dangerous at worst, given the fact that purple and gold would identify Daniel as part of the hierarchy which must be slain.

While other Old Testament prophets had clearly predicted Babylon's fall (Isaiah 13:1-22; 21:1-10; Jeremiah 51:1-58), Daniel's contribution was the specific focus on Belshazzar's demise. According to the Nabonidus Chronicle, the date of Babylon's fall was the 16th of the month of Tishri, which most historians would agree would have been October 12, 539 B.C. The banquet, therefore, would likely have been held the night before, October 11, 539 B.C. When we look at the writing of other historians, Herodotus (5th century B.C.) and Xenophon (434-355 B.C.), we discover some additional details concerning Babylon's fall. With the enormous wall surrounding the city being formidable (see Lesson 5 Aside: The King's Construction), the Medo-Persian army diverted the water from the Euphrates River, which ran under the walls of Babylon. Therefore, given the gap between the wall and the lowered water level, the soldiers were able to wade under the walls and enter the city. Xenophon actually added that the city was invaded while the Babylonians were feasting, a time of drunken stupor. Herodotus also added that a festival was taking place.

Two other ancient documents enlighten the fall of Babylon as well—the Nabonidus Chronicle and the Cyrus Cylinder. Apparently, the Medo-Persian army entered Babylon without a battle. The city's inhabitants, in fact, welcomed the invading army (Nabonidus Chronicle). The Cyrus Cylinder records the city was captured without a battle, and the citizens received Cyrus warmly. Belshazzar, apparently, was never very popular with the people. The peoples who had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians received Cyrus with joy in hopes that he would allow them to return to their homelands (Ezra 1:1-4). Therefore, the peaceful transition to Persian rule described in the book of Daniel seems quite plausible.

Conclusion

We must learn from the mistakes of others. Seeing Nebuchadnezzar's prideful downfall, Belshazzar should have avoided repeating the arrogant sins of his grandfather. Instead, however, he exalted himself against the God who humbled and restored Nebuchadnezzar. As a result, "the handwriting was on the wall." He would be humbled, but, unlike his grandfather, he would not be restored. Numbered, weighed, divided.