

WRITING ON THE WALL

Daniel 5

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

The once mighty Babylonian Empire came to an end in 539 B.C. when Belshazzar was king. This was more than thirty years after the events of chapter four. Daniel was now about eighty years old. When Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C., his son reigned for two years before he was murdered by his brother-in-law. This brother-in-law in turn reigned for four years and died. His son took the throne but was assassinated the same year by some officials of his kingdom in 556 B.C. Nabonidus (556-539 B.C.), one of the assassins, took the throne and ruled Babylon until it was conquered by the Medes and Persians under the leadership of Cyrus in 539 B.C.

Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, was an incapable and unpopular leader. He attempted to reorganize the religion of Babylon and spent much time away from his throne. For this reason, he entrusted the kingship to his son, Belshazzar, in 553 B.C. Belshazzar's name means "Bel protect the king." and in archaeology he is called Bel-shar-uzur. They ruled as co-regents until the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. Nabonidus was the fourth king to reign over Babylon after the death of Nebuchadnezzar. Here are the kings of Babylon, their dates of reign from Nebuchadnezzar to the fall of Babylon and their relationships to one another:

Nebuchadnezzar	[605 – 562 B.C.]
Evil Merodach (Amel Marduk)	[562 – 560 B.C.] (cf 2 Kgs 25:27-30) The son of Nebuchadnezzar
Neriglissar	[560 – 556 B.C.] The brother-in-law of Evil Merodach
Labashi Marduk	[556 B.C.] The son of Neriglissar
Nabonidus of Haran	[556 – 539 B.C.] One of the assassins of Labashi
Belshazzar	[553 – 539 B.C.] The son of Nabonidus

Nabonidus did not spend much time in the capital city. There was a period of fourteen years when he did not even visit Babylon. For his reason he appointed his eldest son, Belshazzar, to rule in Babylon as his co-regent. Nabonidus left Babylon in the hands of his son to pursue other interests in Arabia: commercial, military and religious. He was officially the king of Babylon, but Belshazzar, his son, was practically the king of Babylon. The Bible only refers to Belshazzar as king of Babylon, and not Nabonidus because Belshazzar was the king in his father's absence. This is the setting for chapter five when Belshazzar made a great feast for his lords.

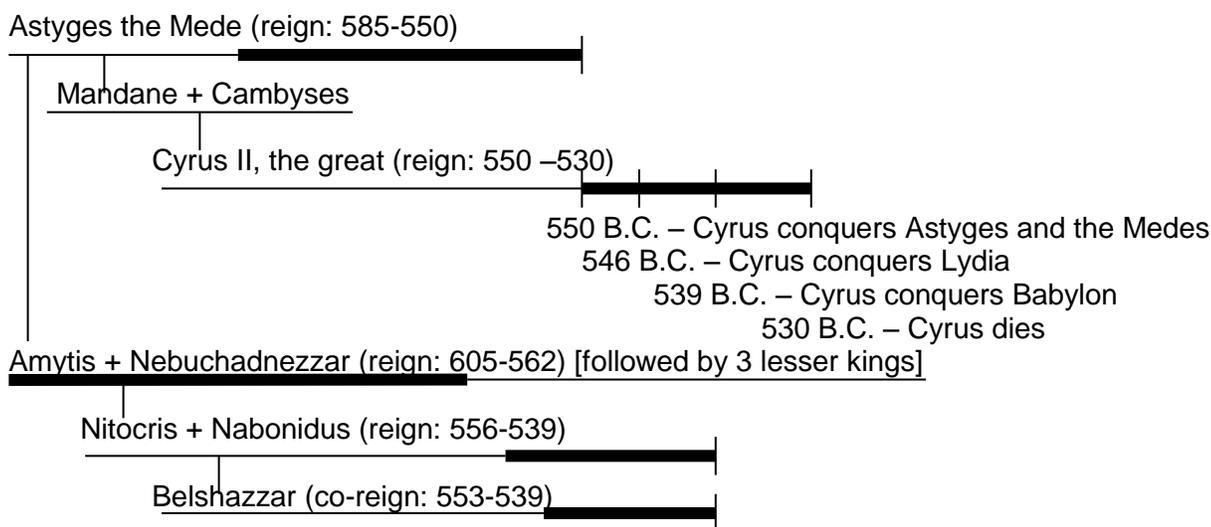
GOD'S MESSAGE WRITTEN ON THE WALL

I. Revelry of Belshazzar – 5:1-4

II. Belshazzar's foolish feast was made on the eve of Babylon's fall in 539 B.C. He seemed to want to show his disdain for the Medo-Persian army that had already conquered several of the cities to the north of Babylon and now were encamped around the very city in which he dwelt. In his pride he thought the capital of Babylon was absolutely secure so he could indulge himself in a drinking party with 1,000 of his officials. He felt there was no need for alarm. His pride caused him to call for the vessels taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem and to drink his wine from them. As he drank his wine, he praised the gods of gold, silver, brass, iron, wood and stone.

Belshazzar, the *defacto* king of Babylon, displayed three attitudes in this feast: his defiance toward the Medo-Persian army; his disrespect toward God; and his devotion to his idols. These are best understood through knowledge of the historical events of that day. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image, the empire that would follow Babylon was symbolized by silver arms and breast (2:32, 39). This empire was founded twelve years after Nebuchadnezzar's death and quickly became a world power under Cyrus

the Great. Cyrus was a Persian and he conquered Astyges, his grandfather, was the king of the Medes. Cyrus joined the Median Empire with his Persian Empire and the two countries to be the Medo-Persian Empire (550 B.C.). Then he conquered the Lydian Empire in 546 B.C. and pressed southward toward Babylon to conquer it. He had one goal in mind—world domination. In early October, 539 B.C., Cyrus defeated the Babylonian city of Opis, which was situated less than one hundred miles north of Babylon on the Tigris River. A short time later, as he pressed toward Babylon, the city of Sippar surrendered to Cyrus, which placed him only 40 miles northwest of Babylon on the Euphrates River. The events of Daniel 5 take place on the evening of October 12, 539 B.C. (cf 5:30). The Medo-Persians had surrounded the city of Babylon and were feigning a siege of the city as Daniel 5 begins the account of the final night of Babylon's glory.



A. Defiance toward the Persians – 5:1

5:1 – The first attitude that Belshazzar displayed under these circumstances was his defiance toward the Persian army. How did he defy the Persians? “He defied the Persians when he made a feast” for his lords and “drank wine” before them. This obviously was a drunken orgy that supposedly served to bolster the spirits of his lords and to show spite to the Medo-Persians’ siege of Babylon. Belshazzar was sure that his great city was impenetrable and could not be threatened by any enemy. The double walls of the great Babylon were 32-85 feet thick and they had enough food stored in the city to last some 40 years! So Belshazzar wanted to demonstrate before his lords his unconcern for the Medo-Persians. He was proud to be the leader of such an unconquerable empire. Also he wanted to flaunt that unconcern before the mighty Medo-Persians to convince them of his unconquerable greatness.

B. Disrespect toward God – 5:2-3

5:2-3 – The second attitude that Belshazzar displayed was his disrespect toward God. It was a common practice to confiscate the religious objects of a conquered nation and place them as treasures in the temple of the home gods (cf 1:2), but it was uncommon for the victor to desecrate those objects for fear of reprisal by that god. It appears from verse two and later from Daniel’s word of rebuke to the king (5:17-24) that Belshazzar was well aware of the nature of these Levitical vessels as well as the implications of his defilement of them. Not only did he wish to defy the Persian army outside of his walls, but he also distained the God of the Jews who had predicted the fall of the Babylonian Empire (cf Dan 2:39; 7:1-5; 8:1-4; Isa 13:17-22; 41:1-5; 44:28-45:4).

The reference to Nebuchadnezzar as “father” of Belshazzar (5:2) must be understood in oriental terms. “Father” may refer to a distant forefather or to an ancestor, as was the case here. Belshazzar was the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar through his mother Nitocris. Nabonidus married Nitocris, the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, and Belshazzar was their son.

C. Devotion toward Idols – 5:4

5:4 – The third attitude that Belshazzar displayed was his devotion to the idols of Babylon. This attitude would serve to defy the gods of the Persians and imply that his gods were superior to their gods. But this attitude was especially sinful when he showed his disrespect and defiance toward the true God of the Jews. When he drank from God’s holy vessels and praised his gods, He defied the God, who alone is the almighty and sovereign God of the world. As such He deserves the singular worship of all people. This lesson had been taught to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4), but Belshazzar considered himself to be greater than Nebuchadnezzar, greater than the Persians and greater than the true God of the Jews. So he foolishly gave all of his devotion to the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, the man-made gods of Babylon (Ps 115:4-8; 135:15-18). Belshazzar was deliberately bringing the true God down to a level beneath himself and all his false gods.

Handwriting on the Wall – 5:5

5:5 – As the drunken feast of Belshazzar progressed and the revelry increased, God manifested Himself in a miraculous and unusual fashion. It probably came very shortly after the temple vessels of God were brought to Belshazzar, filled with wine and he and his lords praised their false gods. The phrase “in the same hour” simply means “shortly afterward” (3:6; 4:33).

When they were defying the power of God and disrespecting His holiness, the fingers of a man’s hand appeared across the room and began to write a message on the plaster of the wall near the lamp stand. The lamp provided enough light for the king to see the hand and the writing on the wall.

Belshazzar had publicly challenged the God of heaven, so God publicly and objectively chose to confront this proud and defiant king with a miracle that would cause great fear to fall upon him. He also would let everyone else in the room know that He was the all-powerful God who was still in control of the affairs of all men, even kings.

Why did God write His message on the wall? First, it was public where everyone in the room could see it. Second, it was permanent in that it remained on the wall for all to study and wonder what was meant by it. Third, it needed an interpreter, so that Daniel would be called as a last resort to represent God and reveal His message. Fourth, it was objective so that it could not be changed.

A. Horror of the King – 5:6-7

5:6 – God’s manifestation of Himself caused a great change in the king’s attitude and behavior. The drunken frivolity previously written on his face was suddenly transformed into ardent sobriety. His mind began to race with troublesome thoughts. All of the fears, which he had attempted to hide behind the stupor of wine, fears concerning the Persians and concerning the God of heaven, now raced through his mind. Belshazzar became so horrified at this inexplicable manifestation of God that he began to tremble violently.

5:7 – The king then urgently called in his occult court officials and requested two things of them. First, he wanted them to read the handwriting on the wall. Second, he wanted them to interpret it. Though the words in verse 25 are Aramaic, apparently they were written in such a way that they were beyond the ability of the king to read them, therefore he needed their help. The king offered three rewards to any wise man who could read and interpret the message. The first reward was a scarlet robe, indicating royalty. The second reward was a golden chain, indicating rank and honor. And the third reward was the position of being the third ruler in the country. This third offer confirms the fact that Belshazzar ruled Babylon as a co-regent with his father, Nabonidus, and the next available position was to be the third ruler in Babylon. (Nabonidus would be first, Belshazzar would be second and the rewarded person would be third in the empire). Belshazzar surely was a desperate man to offer so much power to know this message from God.

B. Helplessness of the Wise Men – 5:8-9

5:8 – Even with so formidable an offer, the wise men of the king were unable to solve the king’s problem. They, too, were unable to read words much less to give their interpretation. God obviously had more in mind for Belshazzar to learn than his court counselors could give to him.

5:9 – Thus the king became even more troubled and fearful, and all of the lords who had been enjoying the king’s drunken banquet were perplexed (alarmed and confused).

III. Recommendation of the Queen – 5:10-12

A. Reassurance for the Fearful King – 5:10

5:10 – The reference to the “queen” probably refers to the queen mother, Nitocris (cf notes on v. 26). Belshazzar’s wives were already at the banquet (v. 3) and this “queen” arrived later. Her detailed familiarity with Nebuchadnezzar and the events surrounding his reign support the idea that this “queen” was Belshazzar’s mother, Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter. Nitocris somehow heard of the troubling events in the palace banquet hall, so she made her appearance in order to encourage the king and provide a solution for the king’s dilemma.

B. Recollection of the Queen Mother – 5:11-12

5:11 – The queen mother brought to Belshazzar’s attention that he had a counselor in his kingdom who had in him “the spirit of the holy gods” (or “the Spirit of the holy God”). Her description of Daniel, who now was around 80 years old, corresponds in many ways to the description of Nebuchadnezzar (4:9, 18). Obviously, Nitocris well remembered Daniel and his dealings with Nebuchadnezzar, even the fact of Daniel’s former place of prominence in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. Daniel did not have that prominent place in the court of Nabonidus and Belshazzar.

5:12 – The queen cited several extraordinary instances where Daniel was able to resolve difficult problems, especially in the area of revelations and prophecies. Some have proposed from these statements that Nitocris was a believer in the true God of heaven. This, of course, is impossible to know from the simple statements of this text. However, if Nebuchadnezzar had become a believer through his experience of chapter four, it is plausible that his daughter, Nitocris, may have done so also. It seems that the queen mother was informing Belshazzar of facts with which he was familiar and she simply reminded him of that which he already knew concerning Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar. Remember that chapter four was, in fact, a public document preserved not only in the Old Testament record, but also in the court records of Babylon!

IV. Reception of Daniel – 5:13-16

A. Opening Remarks to Daniel – 5:13-16

5:13 – In all likelihood, Belshazzar was not anxious to meet Daniel. His opening remarks to Daniel evidence his general acquaintance with this godly man, and Belshazzar was well aware of Daniel’s background and his worship of the God whom he had just defied before his lords.

5:14-16 – It seems, however, that Belshazzar attempted to flatter Daniel by his remarks, which simply parroted those of Nitocris (vs. 11-12). He contrasted the inability of the wise men with all of the favorable things that he had heard concerning Daniel. Belshazzar was in all likelihood seeking to gain a favorable interpretation of the writing by playing upon Daniel’s ego.

B. Offered Reward to Daniel – 5:16

5:16 – Belshazzar did not stop with mere flattery, but he also offered to Daniel that which he had offered the other counselors (cf. v. 7); a royal wardrobe, prestige and co-regency with him and his father.

V. Rebuke of Belshazzar – 5:17-24

A. Refusal of Earthly Reward – 5:17

5:17 – Daniel firmly refused the proffered gifts and honors of Belshazzar. He had long ago learned that the faithful declaration of the Word of God brought far greater reward than the material things of this life. Daniel would not taint his message by the flatteries and offerings of men. Daniel remained truthful and faithful.

B. Rehearsal of Past Judgment – 5:18-21

5:18-19 – Having dispatched the king’s bribes, Daniel launched into a review of Babylon’s history, which Belshazzar in all likelihood was not anxious to hear. It concerned the pride and humiliation of Nebuchadnezzar that is recorded in chapter four. He pointed out that God was the source of Nebuchadnezzar’s power and glory (v. 18). He also recounted how God had given to Nebuchadnezzar all nations and a degree of sovereignty over them in the area of judgment (“whom he would he slew...”) and advancement (“whom he would he set up”). All of this greatness was from God.

5:20-21 – Then Daniel rehearsed before Belshazzar the course of Nebuchadnezzar’s judgment. Two elements were involved. First, Nebuchadnezzar’s heart had been lifted up, that is, it had become exuberant in the glories and greatness of the kingdom. Secondly, his mind, or better, his “spirit” (*ruah*), had hardened or literally had “grown” strong with pride. The statement reflects Nebuchadnezzar’s attitude as recorded in 4:29-30 where the great king credited to himself the things that God had done. Daniel then reminded Belshazzar of the consequences of that pride. Nebuchadnezzar lost his throne, his honor, his contact with mankind, his reason, his home and his conveniences. He remained in this state until the lesson had been learned. God was the sovereign behind the throne of Nebuchadnezzar, so it was God that deserved the honor.

C. Reprimand of Defiant Pride – 5:22-24

5:22 – Having laid the foundation through his review of Nebuchadnezzar’s experience, Daniel drives the point home to Belshazzar. He, as a descendant of great King Nebuchadnezzar, had not learned from Nebuchadnezzar’s experiences. He, Belshazzar, had not humbled his heart before God. The next phrase is the key to this entire chapter. Belshazzar had not humbled himself before God, “though he knew all this.” Belshazzar was acquainted with the public document, which Nebuchadnezzar had issued concerning God’s judgment upon him (Dan 4). Belshazzar knew that the God of heaven claimed the ultimate sovereignty over Babylon and her kings. But Belshazzar resented rather than respected God’s claims as Daniel went on to point out.

5:23 – Instead of submitting to this all-powerful God, Belshazzar purposely defied Him. He “lifted himself up against” this God who had humbled his great ancestor. He did so by purposely desecrating the temple vessels of God, and extolling the stupid and impotent gods of man. Idols are always made in man’s image (sinful). The very God who gave him health and brought him to his station in life had been deliberately and knowingly scorned rather than glorified by this thankless and godless king.

5:24 – Daniel wanted Belshazzar to be well aware of the context of God’s message to him. He showed how Belshazzar had pushed God to the point of swift judgment. God chose the climax of Belshazzar’s defiant pride to reveal miraculously and publicly the judgment to come.

VI. Rendering of the Handwriting – 5:25-29

A. Inscription Read – 5:25

5:25 – Daniel first read the puzzling message. It read in Aramaic: “*Mene, mene, tekel upharsin.*”

B. Interpretation Given – 5:26-29

5:26-29 – Daniel simply declared God’s message to Belshazzar. The interpretation of the words was simple, though their meanings were profound.

“*Mene*” - literally “numbered.” The root idea is “to fix the limit of.” The concept was that God had “numbered” or “fixed” the limit of Belshazzar’s kingdom, and that its end was imminent.

“*Tekel*” – literally “weighed.” The concept was that God’s scale of judgment, based on His standard of righteousness, had found Belshazzar greatly lacking (“wanting”) in morality, humility and gratitude. This figure of God’s scale of justice is commonly employed in the Old Testament (cf. Job 31:6; 1 Sam. 2:3; Ps. 62:9; Prov. 16:2).

“*Upharsin*” – It is from the root *peres*, which means “broken” or “divided.” It reflects the breaking of the Babylonian Empire and doling it out to the Medo-Persians. It is interesting to notice that the consonants in “*peres*” are PRS, the same that are used for the name of Persia in Aramaic (as well as in English). This is an interesting fact because Aramaic and Hebrew words were written only with consonants and no vowels. So the word “divided” (PRS) would also suggest the Persians who would actually divide the Babylonian Empire that night. Belshazzar undoubtedly felt the convicting power of this message because Daniel dared to tell him the truth that he had received from God. No doubt he was stunned, but he carried out his promise to Daniel (5:29) even though Daniel had made it clear to the king that it was not his purpose to be rewarded but rather to simply deliver God’s message. Perhaps the king hoped that somehow this would appease God’s anger. Little did he realize that at that very moment the Persians were entering his “impenetrable” city.

VII. Realization of the Prophecy – 5:30-31

A. Ruin of Belshazzar – 5:30

5:30 – The history of the fall of Babylon is fascinating to study. The popular story is that Cyrus diverted the waters of the great Euphrates River into an old lakebed outside of the city. The waters, which ran under the wall of Babylon and through the middle of the city, steadily became shallower and at the right moment, the Persian general sent his men into the city through the shallow channel to open the gates of the city. His troops probably received very little, if any, resistance from the people of Babylon for they were disgruntled by the joint rule of Belshazzar and Nabonidus. That very night Belshazzar was slain by the Persian troops. History records that the people hailed Cyrus as the liberator of the people. If Babylon was not conquered this way, then it was done by treason from within the city. Babylon fell without a struggle on October 12, 539 B.C.

John C. Whitcomb, Jr wrote a biblical study, *Darius the Mede*, in which he identifies Darius to be Gubaru and the general who conquered Babylon to be Ugbaru. Ugbaru conquered the city on October 12, 539 B.C. Cyrus entered the city with Gubaru on Oct. 29. Ugbaru died on November 6, 539 B.C. Gubaru was made king of Babylon under Cyrus and ruled from 539-525 B.C. He had unlimited power (his name was on the final order against criminals). Darius was the son of Ahasuerus, but not the one in Esther, because he was a Mede, and the one Esther married was a Persian.

B. Rule of Darius – 5:31

5:31 – Cyrus appointed Darius, the Mede, to rule over the newly acquired kingdom of Babylon at the age of about 62 years. King Darius was respected and a very capable assistant to Cyrus, the king of Persia.

The Rulers of the Medo-Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Darius II

Cyrus II the Great [550-530]—In Daniel’s last days; Darius the Mede is king of Babylon [539-525]
 Cambyses [530-522] –Zerubbabel rules Israel under Cyrus and continues to Darius I (a Persian)
 Smerdis [522-521]

Darius I (Hystaspis) [521-486] – Haggai and Zechariah’s prophesy

Xerxes (Ahasuerus) [486-464] – Esther becomes his wife in 478

Artaxerxes [465-423] – He helps Ezra and Nehemiah do their work for God

Darius II [423-404] – Malachi works at the end of Artaxerxes’ reign and continues to Darius II