

Daniel 5:1-12

The Handwriting On the Wall

¹ King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

² Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. ³ Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

⁵ Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. ⁶ Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. ⁷ The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." ⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. ⁹ Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

¹⁰ The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, "O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change.

¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, ¹² because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation." — Daniel 5:1-12 ESV

Once again, the narrative jumps ahead, shifting the focus from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar, the last king to reign over the Babylonian empire. Nebuchadnezzar's daughter, Nitocris, married Nabonidus, to whom she bore Belshazzar. When Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C., he was succeeded by Amel-Marduk. Over a period of nine years, a succession of family members would rule the nation, including Neriglissar, Labashi-Marduk, and Nabonidus. When Nabonidus was exiled in 550 B.C., he appointed his eldest son, Belshazzar, as his co-regent. This places the events of chapter five nearly 66 years after Daniel and his friends arrived in Babylon and some 36 years after the events in chapter four.

Chronologically, the story recorded in chapter five takes place after the events found in chapters seven and eight. The author's decision to rearrange the order was meant to connect Belshazzar's vision with Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Both stories deal with the topic of pride and feature Daniel's God-given capacity to interpret dreams and visions (Daniel 1:17). Daniel was likely in his 80s when this story took place and had been in exile and service to the Babylonian crown for decades.

As the story opens, Belshazzar is hosting a sumptuous feast for 1,000 of his lords. Little did he know that his reign and the dominance of the Babylonian kingdom were about to come to an end. His father, Nabonidus, had already been captured in battle with the Medo-Persians and sent into exile. His departure left Belshazzar in charge of the kingdom and tasked with protecting the capital city from the Medo-Persian army that camped outside its walls.

But instead of making battle plans, the king threw a lavish party for his cronies. As the wine flowed and the tongues loosened, Belshazzar commanded that his stewards retrieve the gold and silver cups that had been plundered from the Temple in Jerusalem when his grandfather had captured the city decades earlier. Facing possible defeat at the hands of the Medo-Persians, Belshazzar decided to relive the glory days of his grandfather and impress his guests with looted treasure from a bygone era. During his short reign, he had done little to expand the borders of his kingdom. He had few exploits to celebrate and no stories of global expansion with which to impress his guests. So, he brought out the symbols of his grandfather's triumphs and drank heartily before his friends and family members.

The author provides a not-so-subtle hint of things to come when he writes, "While they drank from them they praised their idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone" (Daniel 5:4 NLT). The Hebrew audience for which this book was intended would have recognized the warning sign in this statement. Belshazzar and his fellow partiers were using sacred vessels consecrated for use in the worship of Yahweh to celebrate the false gods of Babylon. This pride-filled decision would not turn out well and the text conveys the immediacy of the outcome.

Suddenly, they saw the fingers of a human hand writing on the plaster wall of the king's palace, near the lampstand. The king himself saw the hand as it wrote, and his face turned pale with fright. His knees knocked together in fear and his legs gave way beneath him. – Daniel 5:5-6 NLT

Belshazzar's actions were likely meant to instill a sense of national pride among his key leaders. The nation was on the brink of annihilation and in desperate need of encouragement. But his decision to boast in his own might at the expense of God was a poor one. The vision of a disembodied hand scrawling a message on the wall of his palace left Belshazzar and his guests shaken to the core. The entire entourage sobered up immediately.

In a scene reminiscent of chapters two and four, Belshazzar sent for his enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers. These "wise men" were summoned and brought before the king, who demanded that they use their supernatural powers to ascertain the meaning of the vision.

“Whoever can read this writing and tell me what it means will be dressed in purple robes of royal honor and will have a gold chain placed around his neck. He will become the third highest ruler in the kingdom!” – Daniel 5:7 NLT

Belshazzar was willing to richly reward anyone who could provide an explanation for what he had just witnessed. While the floating hand had disappeared, the message it scrawled was still there for all to see. But the handwriting was in a language no one could decipher. The king’s occult experts were left scratching their heads and unable to interpret what the words said, let alone what they meant. This left the king in an increasing state of unrest and fear. The party was over and the drunken guests could only watch with increasing fear as the king became increasingly more agitated.

At this point, an unlikely and unexpected individual came to the rescue: Nitocris, the king’s own mother. She recalled a scene from the past and informed Belshazzar of a man named Daniel who had come to the aid of her father during a similar situation.

“There is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods. During Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, this man was found to have insight, understanding, and wisdom like that of the gods. Your predecessor, the king—your predecessor King Nebuchadnezzar—made him chief over all the magicians, enchanter, astrologers, and fortune-tellers of Babylon.” – Daniel 5:11 NLT

Due to his advanced age, it seems likely that Daniel’s work schedule had greatly diminished. Despite his position as chief of all the wise men, Daniel had not been summoned to the palace. But the queen noted Daniel’s reputation for solving difficult mysteries.

“This man Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, has exceptional ability and is filled with divine knowledge and understanding. He can interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve difficult problems.” – Daniel 5:12 NLT

She purposefully shares Daniel’s Babylonian name, which is remarkably similar to that of her son. Belshazzar means “Baal protect the king” or “Prince of Bel.” Belteshazzar appears to be the feminine version of that same name and could be translated as “Lady protect the king.” But the similarities between their names would not have escaped Belshazzar. Desperate to have someone translate the words on the wall and provide their meaning, Belshazzar sent for Belteshazzar.

Once again, through a series of strange and unexpected events, God worked behind the scenes to communicate His will to a pagan, pride-filled king. Years had passed and a new king sat on the throne of Babylon, but he too would find himself little more than a pawn on the chessboard of God Almighty. This still-wet-behind-the-ears potentate had a lot to learn about sovereignty and power. He could drink from the Lord’s cups and gloat over his vast power and possessions, but his fate rested in the hands of Yahweh.

Daniel, who was nearing the end of his life, was still a capable vessel in the hands of the Almighty. He was going to be used one more time to serve his God by proclaiming a divine message of judgment upon the arrogant ruler of a pagan kingdom.

God was not done with Daniel, and He was far from done with the nation of Babylon. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God had already predicted the demise of the once-mighty Babylonian empire.

*"I will stir up a destroyer against Babylon
and the people of Babylonia.
Foreigners will come and winnow her,
blowing her away as chaff.
They will come from every side
to rise against her in her day of trouble.
Don't let the archers put on their armor
or draw their bows.
Don't spare even her best soldiers!
Let her army be completely destroyed.
They will fall dead in the land of the Babylonians,
slashed to death in her streets.
For the Lord of Heaven's Armies
has not abandoned Israel and Judah.
He is still their God,
even though their land was filled with sin
against the Holy One of Israel." – Jeremiah 51:1-5 NLT*

Belshazzar had been greatly disturbed by the handwriting on the wall, but he had no idea just how bad his day was about to get. Things were going to go from bad to worse. His little stunt of drinking wine from the vessels of Yahweh was going to cost him dearly. In a vain attempt to glorify himself, Belshazzar mocked God and now he would pay the price.

Daniel 5:13-31

Failure to Measure Up

¹³ Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, “You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. ¹⁴ I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. ¹⁵ Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. ¹⁶ But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. ¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. ¹⁹ And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. ²¹ He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. ²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

²⁴ “Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed. ²⁵ And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. ²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; ²⁷ Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; ²⁸ Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”

²⁹ Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. ³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old. – Daniel 5:13-31 ESV

Daniel, most likely in his 80s, was summoned to appear before the king. The elderly octogenarian, who had served for decades in the courts of the kings of Babylon, did as commanded and entered the familiar courts of the royal palace. Once inside, he was confronted by a scene of chaos and confusion. The room was filled with thousands of Babylon's most powerful and influential citizens who appeared strangely agitated. A contingent of the king's wise men was also present, but these royal counselors seemed to be missing their usual swagger and confidence. The atmosphere was tense as Daniel entered the room and everyone's eyes followed him closely as he slowly made his way to the king's dais. Hushed whispers filled the room as the lords and ladies quietly discussed Daniel's fate. Would he be able to fulfill the king's request? Was this shuffling old man up to the challenge? Some in the room would have recognized Daniel and been familiar with his reputation. Others, unfamiliar with Daniel's back story, would have viewed him with skepticism and doubt. At this late stage of life, it's unlikely that Daniel cut an imposing figure, but he had something going for him that no one else in the room could claim: He had Yahweh's power and presence on his side.

It seems apparent from the text that Belshazzar did not know or recognize Daniel. The king's mother had informed him of Daniel's past exploits under the reign of her father Nebuchadnezzar. So, when Belshazzar saw Daniel, he asked for proof of identity.

"Are you Daniel, one of the exiles brought from Judah by my predecessor, King Nebuchadnezzar?" – Daniel 5:13 NLT

But before Daniel had time to respond, Belshazzar blurted out the distressing nature of the situation.

"I have heard that you have the spirit of the gods within you and that you are filled with insight, understanding, and wisdom. My wise men and enchanters have tried to read the words on the wall and tell me their meaning, but they cannot do it." – Daniel 5:14-15 NLT

The scenario was familiar to Daniel because he had seen and experienced it before. Decades had passed and the king before whom Daniel stood bore a different name but it all must have felt like déjà vu to this aging Hebrew. New king; same old familiar story.

Once Daniel heard the king's explanation of the problem and the more-than-generous reward that accompanied its solution, he bluntly responded, "Keep your gifts or give them to someone else, but I will tell you what the writing means" (Daniel 5:17 NLT). His words would have shocked everyone in the room, including the king's wise men. How dare he talk to the king in such a disrespectful manner? Who did he think he was and how stupid could he be to turn down a chance to become the third-highest ruler in the kingdom?

But Daniel wasn't interested in rewards or royal appointments. He served a higher authority and he made that fact known. He quickly recalled his former relationship with the king's grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, to whom "the Most High God gave sovereignty, majesty, glory,

and honor” (Daniel 5:18 NLT). This simple declaration was intended to let everyone in the room know that Daniel’s God was the one true God, and He was the source behind Nebuchadnezzar’s success.

Daniel could read a room as well as he could read the handwriting on the wall. He knew exactly what was going on and understood the message that Yahweh had sent to Belshazzar. Some things never change, and this much younger king suffered from the same age-old problem of pride as his grandfather. But Daniel knew that Belshazzar had complicated his pride problem by choosing to flaunt his power in the face of Yahweh.

Before revealing his hand to the king, Daniel recounted the painful lesson that Nebuchadnezzar had to learn.

“He [God] made him so great that people of all races and nations and languages trembled before him in fear. He killed those he wanted to kill and spared those he wanted to spare. He honored those he wanted to honor and disgraced those he wanted to disgrace. But when his heart and mind were puffed up with arrogance, he was brought down from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.” – Daniel 5:19-20 NLT

Daniel wasn’t telling Belshazzar anything he didn’t already know. The young king would have been familiar with the stories of his grandfather’s power and glory. He would also know about the seven-year period of insanity Nebuchadnezzar endured. But Belshazzar’s recent behavior demonstrates that he was less than familiar with the role Yahweh played in his grandfather’s rise and fall. This news would have come as a surprise and, to ensure that Belshazzar connected all the dots, Daniel added that Nebuchadnezzar “was driven from human society. He was given the mind of a wild animal, and he lived among the wild donkeys. He ate grass like a cow, and he was drenched with the dew of heaven, **until he learned that the Most High God rules over the kingdoms of the world and appoints anyone he desires to rule over them**” (Daniel 5:21 NLT).

This last line was meant to drive home a point. Daniel wanted Belshazzar to understand the gravity of his situation. He had been given a message from the same God who had stricken his grandfather with a long-term case of insanity. Daniel even claims that Belshazzar knew of God’s involvement in Nebuchadnezzar’s fall but refused to acknowledge it. Instead, he treated Yahweh with contempt by desecrating the sacred cups dedicated for use in Yahweh’s house. He had profaned what was holy. He had taken what belonged to God and used it for his own selfish desires. He and his drunken guests had quenched their thirsts at the expense of God’s glory. To make matters worse, they used those same cups to honor their false gods.

*“You and your nobles and your wives and concubines have been drinking wine from them while praising gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods that neither see nor hear nor know anything at all. **But you have not honored the God who gives you the breath of life and controls your destiny!**” – Daniel 5:23 NLT*

Belshazzar didn't need to read the handwriting on the wall to understand what had taken place or the motivation behind it. He recognized pride and arrogance when he saw it but he was also able to see the depth of the message contained in the simple hand-scrawled message: "Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin" (Daniel 5:25 ESV). These words were written in Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Babylonian government. Everyone in the room could read them but no one could decipher their meaning. Each word is a term referring to weights and measures. Mene (*mēnē*) was used to refer to a weight of measurement (50-60 shekels) and to convey the act of numbering or measuring something. It carries the idea of balancing scale. Tekel (*tēqal*) refers to the act of being measured. Parsin (*pāras*) comes from a word that means "to divine" or "to break in two." It was often used to refer to a half-shekel. These words, joined together in an awkward, incomplete sentence made no sense to anyone in the room, except Daniel.

The words literally read "Weighed, weighed, measured, and broken." Yet only Daniel was able to assess their true meaning, which he quickly revealed.

"Mene means 'numbered'—God has numbered the days of your reign and has brought it to an end. Tekel means 'weighed'—you have been weighed on the balances and have not measured up. Parsin means 'divided'—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians." — Daniel 5:26-28 NLT

As Belshazzar feared, this was not good news. God was letting the king know that his days were numbered and the glory days of the Babylonian empire were quickly coming to an end. But Belshazzar had no idea just how quickly this message was going to be fulfilled. God had seen enough. He had used the Babylonians to accomplish His judgment against the people of Judah but now He was ready to punish them for the very role they played. This may seem unfair or malicious on God's part, but He had never forced Nebuchadnezzar to invade Judah. God simply used the king's natural desire for global domination to accomplish His own sovereign will for Judah's subjugation.

It's fascinating to consider the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

*"Flee from Babylon! Save yourselves!
Don't get trapped in her punishment!
It is the Lord's time for vengeance;
he will repay her in full.
Babylon has been a gold cup in the Lord's hands,
a cup that made the whole earth drunk.
The nations drank Babylon's wine,
and it drove them all mad.
But suddenly Babylon, too, has fallen." — Jeremiah 51:6-8 NLT*

That day had come and Belshazzar would be the last king to rule over the Babylonian empire. In fact, he had less than 24 hours to live. After fulfilling his promise to reward Daniel for interpreting the message, Belshazzar was killed that very night. The Persians and Medes

conquered Babylon in October 539 B.C., ending Belshazzar's life and ushering in the era of Medo-Persian dominance.

Daniel walked out of the room dressed in a royal robe, draped in gold chains, and possessing unprecedented power and influence that must have left the king's wise men in a fit of rage and jealousy. This elderly, unassuming servant of Yahweh was elevated to a place of honor within the Babylonian government, while the pride-filled king was dethroned and deprived of life. This stark contrast reflects the timeless truth found in the pages of the Scriptures.

*Pride ends in humiliation,
while humility brings honor. – Proverbs 29:23 NLT*

*The Lord mocks the mockers
but is gracious to the humble. – Proverbs 3:34 NLT*

"...those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." – Matthew 23:12 NLT

*God opposes the proud
but gives grace to the humble. – 1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6 NLT*

