

## SESSION SEVEN

### DANIEL 5:1-31

#### *Babylon . . . Your Number Is Up!*

#### INTRODUCTION

The closing verses of chapter four (in which Nebuchadnezzar praises the God of Heaven following his humbling) stand in stark contrast to chapter five in which Belshazzar arrogantly defies the God of Heaven.

Daniel 5 is a turning point in the first major section of the book, both from a literary perspective as well as historical perspective. Chapters 2–4 dealt with King Nebuchadnezzar, but now the narrative jumps forward at least 23 years. Nevertheless, the next three chapters (5–7) parallel the previous three in their motifs.

#### THE LITERARY STRUCTURE

Chapter 5 marks a turning point in the literary structure of chapters 2–7:

- A* Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of the Image: Gentile powers & Messiah's kingdom (ch 2)
- B* Refusal to Worship the Image of Gold - deliverance from the furnace (ch 3)
- C* Nebuchadnezzar's Tree Dream; Humbled for pride by animal madness (ch 4)
- C'* Belshazzar's Feast; Humbled for arrogant defiance by defeat of Babylon (ch 5)
- B'* Refusal to Forgo Prayer - deliverance from the lions (ch 6)
- A'* Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts: Gentile powers & Messiah's kingdom (ch 7)



### Significance of the Literary Structure

1. Since the dream of the image (ch 2) and the vision of the four beasts are parallel, one helps interpret the other.
2. The turning point in the literary structure falls between chapters four and five, suggesting that this is a significant point in the author's presentation.

Chapters 4 and 5 are similar in that both deal with Babylonian kings whose pride needed to be humbled before the God of Heaven. The nature (and extent) of the humbling, however, is different. In chapters 2–4, God progressively dealt with Nebuchadnezzar, revealing more about Himself and sovereignly bringing him to a point of praise of the true God. Obviously, God could have dealt accordingly with each and every king thereafter—humbling them until at last they praised Him. By the end of chapter 4, however, the point had sufficiently been made as to who truly rules over human affairs. There is not a need to demonstrate this again (at least in the same way), and judgment is allowed to fall upon Babylon so as to advance the revelation of the successive Gentile powers.

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

There is a gap of at least 23 years between chapters 4 and 5 (probably longer), and several considerations need to be taken into account.

1. The chapters are not in chronological order (7 & 8 precede ch 5). The author seems to have been interested in completing the downward spiral of Babylon's demise before taking up other visions.
2. Historical Shift
  - a. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC after a reign of 43 years.
  - b. Several rulers held office between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (see Appendix H.9 for details).
  - c. Belshazzar was actually a coruler over Babylon with his father.
    - 1) Nabonidus spent ten years away from Babylon (at Teima in Arabia), during which time the daily administration was entrusted to Belshazzar.
    - 2) Nabonidus returned to Babylon sometime during the years 542-540 BC, apparently as the Persian menace intensified.
  - d. Daniel had been in Babylon for 66 years, and was probably in his eighties by this point.
3. The Challenge of Cyrus II the Great [cf. Appendix H.9-12 on the Historical Background]
  - a. 550 BC - Led the Persians in victory over the Medes.
  - b. During the year(s) prior to Dan 5 (539 BC) - Cyrus began his advance against Babylon.

- c. In September and early October of 539 BC, Cyrus conquered the neighboring cities to Babylon of Sippar and Akkad.<sup>1</sup>
- d. Cyrus's advance had now come all the way to Babylon, the capital of the kingdom.

Insight: The feast which is recorded in Daniel 5 was not just an ordinary feast. The Babylonian Empire was crumbling as Cyrus took several key cities and had even advanced on the capital of Babylon itself. Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus, had already led an assault upon the Medo-Persian forces of Cyrus, but had been defeated and fled to Borsippa.<sup>2</sup> At the time of this feast, the city of Babylon was surrounded by the troops of Ugbaru, a general under Cyrus. Perhaps Belshazzar and the citizens of Babylon felt secure behind the massive walls of the city, having enough food and provisions to outlast a siege of several years.

#### A. THE SETTING: BELSHAZZAR'S INSOLENT AT THE FEAST (5:1-4)

1. The "*gold vessels*" (vv 2-3)

These were the vessels from the Jerusalem Temple that were used in the worship and service of the true God of Heaven. Two improper actions are involved here:

- a. The use of the vessels sacrilegiously was wrong (notice the repetition in verses 2 & 3 - taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem).
- b. To make matters worse, they filled them with wine and used them for toasting man-made worthless gods.

2. "*the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone*" (v 4)

This is a reference to the Babylonian deities, with attention called to the materials that the idols were made of. This is also an appraisal of them (these materials were all the substance the pagan gods had).

3. The implication: an open defiance of the God of Heaven!

The question: will God answer to this direct challenge? Not only would He answer, He already had!!

- a. 150 years earlier: Isaiah 46:1-2; 47:1-15
- b. About 50 years earlier: Jeremiah 50:1-2,18; 51:7-8,11,41b-44, 57-58

#### B. THE INSCRIPTION AND BELSHAZZAR'S PERPLEXION (5:5-9)

1. The "*hand*" which wrote (v 5)

The hand which wrote the characters on the wall was also the hand in whom Belshazzar's life rested. Notice how this irony is brought out in 5:23 and 5:24! "But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified." Belshazzar was nothing

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<sup>1</sup>This is recorded in the Nabonidus Chronicle. See James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 3rd ed., 306.

<sup>2</sup>This detail comes from the historical account given by the Chaldean writer Berosus, which is preserved in the writings of Josephus ("Against Apion," I:20 [p 614 in the Kregel publication, trans. by Whiston]).

more than a puny king in the hand of the eternal God who judges him. In contrast, the Babylonian deities cannot speak out or even raise so much as a finger to help him.

2. Proximity to the lampstand

*NASB* = "opposite the lampstand"    *NIV* = "near the lampstand"

Observation: the same word *lāqōbēl* is used in 5:1 where it was translated "in the presence of." Hence, the *NIV* is more accurate; the writing was made in the illumination of the lampstand.

3. The reward as "third ruler" in the kingdom

Belshazzar was the second highest ruler with his father Nabonidus being the highest. So the highest position he could offer was the third highest ruler.

Note: For many years, critical scholars doubted the historicity of this chapter, since the extrabiblical literature named Nabonidus as the Babylonian ruler whom Cyrus defeated and since the name of Belshazzar did not even appear. The discovery of the Nabonidus Cylinder with its mention of Belshazzar as the son of Nabonidus verified the historical accuracy of the biblical account.<sup>3</sup>

4. Why was the inscription impossible for others to read?

- a. We do not know if it was even written in Aramaic.
- b. The issue is probably the significance of the words.

**C. THE QUEEN'S RECOMMENDATION TO CALL IN DANIEL (5:10-12)**

This is possibly the queen mother, i.e., the mother of Belshazzar (Nitocris, the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar and wife of Nabonidus). She would have not only remembered the elderly Daniel but all his dealings with Nebuchadnezzar as well.

**D. THE KING'S OFFER TO REWARD DANIEL IF HE COULD INTERPRET (5:13-16)**

**E. DANIEL'S RESPONSE (5:17-28)**

1. His Refusal of Earthly Rewards (17)

Daniel was not motivated by such things. It takes a man of genuine godly character to pass up the glitter of worldly desires. For him, the rewards were wrong because of the context in which they were offered—a context of belittling the God whom he loved and served.

Matt 4 – Jesus turned down Satan's offer to have kingdoms.

2. The Reminder of God's Lesson on Pride with Nebuchadnezzar (18-21)

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<sup>3</sup>For the cuneiform texts related to Nabonidus and Belshazzar, see D. Winton Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times*, 89-91. Cf. Walvoord, 114.

All men, even rulers, must recognize who the true RULER is, and must humbly submit themselves before Him as Lord. Nebuchadnezzar was a grand illustration that no matter who you are or how much you have going for you, you cannot escape the consequences of the sin of pride. But some people learn very little from history!

Personal Reminder:

Prov 29:1! Every time you hear the truth and pass it by, you will be less and less prone to obey it the next time. You become callous and lose your sensitivity to the Word of God.

3. The Charge of Insolence Against Belshazzar (22-23)

a. Confrontation

The task of confronting someone with the truth is not easy, but thank God for those who can (especially for those who can do it lovingly and with the intention of restoring a brother – Gal 6:1).

b. Illustration: Being defiant before God (poem by Sara Teasdale)

4. The Inscription Revealed (24-28)

The inscription consisted of four words, each of which signified an aspect of the judgment falling on Belshazzar. Each word is related etymologically to the key verb of the sentence.

a. MENE (*m<sup>e</sup>nē'* - מְנֵן) - Daniel understood this as a passive participle of the verb *m<sup>e</sup>nāh* (מְנָה) meaning "numbered, counted out." The point was that the years of Belshazzar's reign had been numbered and the end had come. The repetition of the word underscored the certainty of the matter. No more would be given.

b. TEKEL (*t<sup>e</sup>qēl* - תְּקֵל) - Daniel understood this as a passive participle of the verb *t<sup>e</sup>qal* (תְּקַל) meaning "weighed." The point was that God had found Belshazzar deficient in the scales and therefore rejected him. Cf. 1 Sam 2:3 - "The LORD is a God of knowledge, and with Him actions are weighed."

Reminder: The Lord has no problem evaluating us, because He is not subject to the same limitations that you and I are.

c. PERES<sup>4</sup> (*p<sup>e</sup>rēs* - פָּרַס) - Daniel understood this as a passive participle of the verb *p<sup>e</sup>ras* which meant to "break in two, divide." The point was that Belshazzar's kingdom (the Babylonian Empire) had been divided or separated from him and given over to the Medes and Persians who were besieging the city.

d. An intended pun

The last word PERES was related to the verb *p<sup>e</sup>ras* ("divide"), but also to the word for Persia, *pāras* (פָּרַס). Not only was Belshazzar's kingdom divided, but the Persians (the dominating people of the Medo-Persian army) would conquer them. Indeed, the Persian Cyrus the Great would soon march into Babylon as victor.

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<sup>4</sup>In vs 25, the word UPHARSIN is written, but in vs. 28 PERES is written. The initial "U" in the first case is simply a connective ("and") joining the words TEKEL and PHARSIN. PHARSIN and PERES, despite their dissimilarity in English, are both derived from the same root "PRS" in Aramaic (פָּרַס).

**F. OUTCOMES (5:29-31)**

1. Daniel honored - probably in mockery (cf. vs 17).
2. Belshazzar's Defeat That Night (v 30)

The king thought he was so secure behind the massive walls<sup>5</sup> of Babylon, but that night (Oct 12, 539 BC) a general of Cyrus named Ugbaru took the city with hardly a battle. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (1.191), the city was taken not by a bloody battle of storming the walls but by a sneak attack through the Euphrates which ran through the middle of Babylon. Archer summarizes,

Unknown to them, Cyrus's resourceful commander, Ugbaru (referred to in the Chronicle as governor of Gutium), had diverted the waters of the Euphrates to an old channel dug by a previous ruler . . . suddenly reducing the water level below the river-gates. Before long the Persian besiegers would come wading in at night and clamber up the river-bank walls before the guards knew what was happening.<sup>6</sup>

3. Cyrus's Victory over Babylon

According to the Nabonidus Chronicle (*ANET*, 306), Cyrus entered Babylon several days later (Oct 29). Apparently Cyrus appointed a Mede (Gubaru?) to rule over Babylon [see Appendix *H.9-12*].

**A Lesson for Our Life**

1. Read the latter part of Dan 5:23 one more time.
2. Belshazzar had been entrusted with much in life as ruler over the Babylonian Empire. He could have used that position of influence for the sake of the Lord God. Instead, he wasted his life away, and in a drunken moment even defied God through a blasphemous act. A wasted life is always sad to see no matter whom it involves.
3. Each of us is given one life which we are responsible to use wisely and for the glory of God. Psalm 90:12 admonishes us, "Teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom."
4. If God were to give you 70 years to live, how would you plan to spend your life so as to bring the most glory to Him? Would you change anything you are now doing? How do you plan to use your future for Him?
5. Suggestion:  
Try to sit down with a paper and pen and make a chart how you will use the rest of your life to bring glory to God.

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<sup>5</sup>A number of scholars have challenged Herodotus's assertion that the walls of Babylon were 330 feet high. Even if not, they apparently were enormous (cf. Jer 51:44,58).

<sup>6</sup>Gleason Archer, "Daniel," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 7:70.