



Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

Keith Chuvala, [Keith@BackToTheBibleCatechism.com](mailto:Keith@BackToTheBibleCatechism.com)

## Chapter 5: The (Hand) Writing on the Wall

### 5:1-4, Belshazzar's Feast

Belshazzar the king: As of Chapter 5, Nebuchadnezzar is no king of Babylon. Belshazzar is the son of Nabonidus. So who is Nabonidus??? Some of the details of this transition of power are recorded on the Nabonidus Cylinders, which is in our times on display in the British Museum. The ancient historian Berosus also helps us with the chronology. Nebuchadnezzar died after reigning 43 years. His son, Evil-Merodach (2 Kings 25:27-30, Jeremiah 52:31-34) ascended to the throne, but ruled for only two years, as he was assassinated by his brother-in-law Neriglassar (named as “Nergalsharezer” in Jeremiah 39:3, 13), because Evil-Merodach’s rule was “arbitrary and licentious”. Neriglassar ruled for four years until he died of natural causes. Neriglassar’s son Laborosoarchod, a child allegedly of diminished mental capacity, ruled for only nine months, being beaten to death by a gang of conspirators. Among the conspirators was Nabonidus, who was then chosen from the gang to be king. Nabonidus ruled until Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon. But during the latter part of his reign, Nabonidus went to war, was living in Arabia, and left the business of the day-to-day rule of Babylon to his eldest son, Belshazzar. According to Babylonian records, Belshazzar became “co-regent” with Nabonidus’ ca. 553 B.C., and continued in that capacity till the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C. Phew!

It is very likely, then, that at the time written of in Daniel 5, Nabonidus had gone out to fight the Medo-Persian army and perhaps had been already captured. Those armies now surrounded the capitol of Babylon, and were looking for a way into the strongly fortified city.

Made a great feast for a thousand of his lords: In Babylon, a large court – 56 by 170 feet – has been unearthed, decorated with Greek columns. This is probably where this feast took place.

Belshazzar was apparently not too afraid of the siege surrounding the city. Babylon reportedly had impressive military defenses and vast store of supplies. Commentator David Guzik:

*Conservative calculations set the dimensions of the ancient city of Babylon like this:*

- *The outer walls were 17 miles (27 kilometers) long.*
- *These walls were 22 feet (7 meters) thick and 90 feet (28 meters) high.*
- *The outer walls also had guard towers another 100 feet (30 meters) high.*
- *The city gates were made of bronze.*
- *A system of inner and outer walls and moats made the city very secure.*

Which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple: 'Tis true that Nebuchadnezzar was not the biological father (or grandfather) of Belshazzar. He was Belshazzar's father in the sense of having previously occupied the throne Belshazzar now sat on. It's also possible that Nebuchadnezzar *was* his grandfather on his mother's side. Either usage of the term "father" was common in ancient times.

They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone: This is a blasphemous feast from the Jewish perspective, to be sure.

They brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem: Belshazzar seemed to not only lose all semblance of self-control at this party, but also intended to openly mock God.

With enemy armies at his own gates, using the vessels from the Jewish temple served the purpose of reminding the assembled partiers of their previous victory, and Belshazzar hoped it would boost morale.

### **5:5-9, God Writes a Message on a Wall**

The fingers of a man's hand appeared: God sometimes communicate to man in unexpected, even shocking ways. He sure knows how to get our attention! Here, a hand mysteriously appeared and wrote on a wall. This, of course, is where we get the proverbial phrase "the (hand) writing on the wall". But it's not *handwriting*; it is "hand writing"!

The joints of his hips were loosed and his knees knocked: What a picture of a man completely dissembled by what he sees! Daniel’s vivid description conveys clearly that Belshazzar was not just troubled, but *terrified*. His intent for the feast to be a carefree party was certainly ruined. But God does this because Belshazzar *is reachable*.

We know it wasn’t the message that the hand had written that troubled him; Belshazzar could not understand the writing.

Commentator John Trapp:

*The writing on the wall he could neither read nor understand; but his conscience had written bitter things against him, which now being held to the fire of God’s wrath become legible.*

Whoever reads the writing, and tells me its interpretation: This sounds familiar, doesn’t it? This is perhaps another way in which Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar’s “father” – God had spoken to both in direct, but cryptic, ways.

He shall be the third ruler in the kingdom: Why third? The real (first) king was Nabonidus, even in his absence from Babylon. Belshazzar ruled as second in the kingdom. So the best he had to offer was the third place.

They could not read the writing, or make known to the king its interpretation: When Daniel came to interpret these words, it does not seem so hard to figure out. It may be that God deliberately put a veil over the minds of these men so Daniel would be called. Some commentators posit that the Babylonian wise men could not read the writing because it was in Hebrew. We don’t know for sure.

### **5:10-16, Daniel is Recommended as an Interpreter**

The queen... came to the banquet hall: Whether this is Belshazzar’s queen, or the queen mother, isn’t identified clearly, and the wording isn’t specific. It’s possible it was Belshazzar’s mother, who very well might have been the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar (see the earlier discussion on “father”).

There is a man in your kingdom: Apparently when the wise men were called to explain the writing on the wall to Belshazzar, Daniel was excluded, perhaps being fully retired, or semi-retired, still holding a government office yet not a regularly visible figure in Belshazzar’s administration.

This Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: It’s very interesting that the queen referred to Daniel by his *Jewish* name, apparently showing respect for his faith,

background, and perhaps even his service to Babylon. At this point he would be an elder statesman, or an emeritus head counselor to the King.

I have heard of you: Since Belshazzar didn't think to call for Daniel himself, it seems that his remembrance of Daniel was either not informed enough to know Daniel's history, or perhaps he had no regard for Daniel, and what he had "heard" about Daniel came to him just now, from the queen!

### **5:17-23, Part I: Belshazzar's Sinful Pride**

Let your gifts be for yourself: Remember that Daniel himself was troubled when he had to give Nebuchadnezzar bad news about his future (4:19). That is not the case here. Daniel was not impressed with this successor of Nebuchadnezzar.

You his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this: Belshazzar should have known better, and Daniel doesn't hold back. Even if he was not raised in a godly home, Kings are educated in the history of their kingdom and the significant events that affected their rule. The stories related to us in earlier chapters would have been part of Belshazzar's education; he should have known about God's dealings with and through Daniel, even if he did not believe in God.

The God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified: It would be easy for Belshazzar to think that he never did anything against Daniel's God, at least before the feast using items from the Temple in Jerusalem. But that's not the first charge levied against him. Daniel tells him that in as much as he had failed to glorify the one true God, he is held to account, as every creature is obligated to give glory to their Creator. It's not his blasphemous use of cups and plates; it is his rejection of faith in spite of the education he had received about God's dealings with Nebuchadnezzar.

### **5:24-28, Part II: God's Judgment**

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of each word: Each of these sounds like an Aramaic word which represents a short sentence. Mene is counting, tekel is weighing, and peres is division. Why these could not be interpreted to create a cohesive message for the king by his other magicians and counselors is easy to understand.

Weighed in the balances, and found wanting: A mighty army and brilliant tactics overcame the Babylonian Empire, yet it still fell from within. The armies of the Medes and Persians could only conquer because Belshazzar and his kingdom were found lacking in spiritual and moral values.

Given to the Medes and Persians: The ancient Greek historian Herodotus tells us that the Persian King Cyrus conquered Babylon by diverting the flow of the Euphrates into a nearby swamp. This lowered the level of the river so his troops marched through the water and under the river-gates. They still would not have been able to enter had not the bronze gates of the inner walls been left inexplicably unlocked. This was exactly what God predicted in Isaiah 44:28-45:7 and Jeremiah 51:57-58. God opened the gates of the city of Babylon for Cyrus, and put it in writing 200 years before it happened!

From J. Alec Motyer's commentary on Isaiah, cited by David Guzik:

*In October 539 BC, Cyrus advanced into lower Mesopotamia and, leaving Babylon till last, conquered and occupied the surrounding territory. Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Nabonidus of Babylon deserted his city, leaving it in the charge of his son Belshazzar... the taking of Babylon was as bloodless and effortless as Daniel 5 implies.*

### **5:29-31, Daniel is Promoted, Belshazzar Dies**

They clothed Daniel with purple: Even though his words were harsh and tragic, Daniel was immediately rewarded. Perhaps Belshazzar knew that Daniel was right and tried to do the best thing he could under the inevitable circumstances. Perhaps a desperate act to appease God?

That he should be the third ruler in the kingdom: A post which Daniel held for only a few hours, as it turns out! We'll see that Daniel was also promoted in the kingdom that succeeded Belshazzar, but that was due to God, not to Belshazzar.

That very night: The prophecy was fulfilled just as Daniel said. God's Word is always reliable and true.

Darius the Mede received the kingdom: Darius was a ruler (governor or "sub-king") under Cyrus the Great of Persia. He is often referred to in secular histories as "Gubaru" or "Gobryas", the conqueror of Babylon.