

Daniel 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Daniel chapter 5. King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and 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. 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. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. 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. Then the king's color changed and his thoughts alarmed him. His limbs gave way and his knees knocked together.

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.

Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed and his color changed and his lords were perplexed. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. O king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. 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.

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. 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.

[3 : 40] 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. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this. 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 honoured.

Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed, and this is the writing that was inscribed, Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parson, this is the interpretation of the matter.

Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom, and brought it to an end. Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Peres, your kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.

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.

That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old. Daniel chapter 5 continues the Aramaic section of the book. It corresponds with chapter 2 in the bookended structure of this section, from chapter 2 to chapter 7. Both chapters concern the humbling of kings, although the outcome for Belshazzar is very different than that for Nebuchadnezzar.

[5 : 26] Once again, the story of Babel and its themes lies close in the background. Babel, of course, was the original Babylon, a hubristic attempt of man to make a kingdom that would last forever, to gather together time, to gather together heaven and earth, and to gather together all of humankind in this one world society. At the beginning of chapter 1 of the book of Babylon, the temple vessels were mentioned as having been taken from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

These are, as it were, a Chekhov's gun in the book, and now finally, in chapter 5, it's going to get fired. A lot of history has transpired between the time of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Nebuchadnezzar reigned from 605 BC to 562 BC. After him, there were four very short reigns of kings before Nabonidus came to the throne in 556 BC. For many years, the absence of any reference to Belshazzar within the archaeological and other material led people to believe that he was just a figure invented within the biblical text with no historical basis. Figures like Belshazzar gave support to the claim that the book of Daniel was merely a work of historical fiction. However, later discoveries made clear that Belshazzar was in fact a historical figure, and vindicated the biblical text and its references to him. Belshazzar was the son and the crown prince of Nabonidus. He was not the sole ruler at this time, but was in a co-regency with his father. However, as his father was away from Babylon for a long period of time, in a sort of self-imposed exile, Belshazzar exercised more royal prerogatives than we might initially expect. Many scholars also believe that Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's maternal grandfather,

Belshazzar's mother, the queen in this story, being Nebuchadnezzar's daughter. The story of chapter 5 begins with Belshazzar throwing a great feast for his nobles. In the course of the celebration of the feast, he brings in the vessels of gold and silver that had been taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. These vessels, dedicated to the service of the lord, Belshazzar and his lords used for their drunken revelries and their idolatrous worship. We should recall that priests were specifically prohibited from drinking while in the temple. In the context of the book of Leviticus, the deaths of Nadab and Abihu as they offered strange fire to the lord is implied to have resulted from their drinking of wine. We should also think back to Jeremiah chapter 25, where the lord declares through the prophet Jeremiah that he will test the various nations that had been involved in the downfall of Jerusalem. This judgment will occur as they drink his cup of wrath and reel in the resulting drunkenness. In verses 15 to 29 of that chapter, Thus the lord, the god of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them. So I took the cup from the lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the lord sent me drink it. Jerusalem, and the cities of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, his servants, his officials, all his people, and all the mixed tribes among them, all the kings of the land of Uz, and all the kings of the land of the Philistines, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of

Ashtod, Edom, Moab, and the sons of Ammon, all the kings of Tyre, all the kings of Sidon, and the kings of the coastland across the sea, Dedan, Temer, Buz, and all who cut the corners of their hair, all the kings of Arabia, and all the kings of the mixed tribes who dwell in the desert, all the kings of Zimri, all the kings of Elam, and all the kings of Media, all the kings of the north, far and near, one after another, and all the kingdoms of the world that were on the face of the earth, and after them the king of Babylon shall drink. Then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Drink, be drunk, and vomit, fall, and rise no more, because of the sword that I am sending among you. And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, You must drink. For behold, I begin to work disaster at the city that is called by my name. And shall you go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, declares the Lord of hosts.

It seems that not only the drinking vessels of the temple have been brought to this feast, but also the lampstand. The fact that it is spoken of as the lampstand suggests that this is the lampstand of the temple in Jerusalem itself, an object that had been consecrated to the Lord's service.

[10:02] The lampstand was associated in some ways with the high priest within the temple. It was connected with the almond or watcher tree, whose blossoms were represented upon it. Some commentators also observe its similarity to a scale's, with counterbalancing stems on either side. It has a tree-like character. In other respects, it could be associated with the hand.

There are five lampstands on either side of the temple, like the five digits on each of a person's hands. In the context, it seems clear that it symbolises the Lord's light-giving presence in the situation, watching, inspecting, and bringing matters into judgment. Opposite this lampstand, and presumably in association with the lampstand, the king sees the fingers of a human hand, writing in the plaster of the wall, or the dust of the wall. Writing with the finger of God is rare in scripture. The one clear association is the writing of the tablets of the law in the book of Exodus. Another associated instance might be Jesus' writing on the ground in John chapter 8, as the woman caught in adultery was brought to him. The king's response to this sign is sheer terror.

His colour changes, the colour of his face. His thoughts, the thoughts of his heart, alarm him. His loins were loosed, some translations give this as his limbs giving way, and his knees knocked together. The reference to his loins being loosed suggests that he involuntarily defecates himself.

This would have been a fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 45 verse 1. Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the belts or loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

We might also recognise that we are here moving down through the king's body, in a way that corresponds with the great image of chapter 2. The changed countenance is the head of gold, the silver chest is the thoughts of the heart, the loosed loins is the waist and thighs, and the iron legs are the knees knocking together. King Belshazzar, the personal representative of the great tower of Babylon, is being shaken and toppled. We might also recognise behind this account some allusions back to the ritual of the law of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5, when a woman was suspected of adultery by her husband, and yet there was insufficient evidence to convict her. The woman could be brought to the Lord, where the Lord would render judgement directly upon her himself, giving her a test of jealousy. The test of jealousy involved taking some dust from the tabernacle floor, mixing it in with water, which also contained scraped off handwriting of a curse. If a guilty woman drank this, the Lord would bring a miraculous punishment upon her. Numbers chapter 5 verses 21 to 22 describe what would happen. The Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people. When the Lord makes your thigh fall away and your body swell, may this water that brings a curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away, and the woman shall say, Amen, Amen. In Daniel chapter 5 we have another inspection of jealousy with elements that recall this earlier rite. There is handwriting, where in the original rite there was dust from the tabernacle floor. Here there is the plaster, or what could be rendered, the dust of the wall. In Numbers chapter 5 the woman drinks from a cup prescribed by the Lord. In Daniel chapter 5 Belshazzar and his Lord sacrilegiously drink from the cups of the Lord.

[13 : 27] The words Amen, Amen that the woman pronounces are an anagram of the words Mene Mene, and the womb swelling and the thigh falling away could be seen to correspond with the loosening of Belshazzar's loins.

Belshazzar summons the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers, promising them a huge reward if they are able to read the writing and make the interpretation known to him. The promise that they would be the third ruler in the kingdom fits with what we know of Belshazzar, whereas other kings might have offered that the person would be the second ruler in the kingdom. As Belshazzar is co-regent with his father Nabonidus, he can only offer the third spot. After the enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers have failed, the queen, who is likely the queen mother, the wife of Nabonidus, and the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, and hence a person of great importance in the court, especially in the absence of her husband Nabonidus, gives her counsel to her son. The queen is the only woman who speaks in the book of Daniel. By this point Daniel is likely in his 80s and has been out of the service of the king for some time. The queen, however, remembers Daniel and the way that the lord used Daniel in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar, by contrast, is like the pharaoh that forgot Joseph. Belshazzar doesn't seem to be entirely ignorant of Daniel, however. When Daniel is brought in before him, he exhibits some knowledge of Daniel beyond what his mother told him. Possibly by this point he would have hidden the temple vessels, not wanting Daniel to realise what had been going on. Daniel, who interestingly has called Daniel through most of this account, refuses the gifts of the king, but says that he would read the writing and make known the interpretation. He begins, however, not directly by giving the reading of the text and its interpretation, but by speaking about the contrast between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar.

Within the bookended structure of these chapters, chapters 4 and 5 give accounts of two humbled kings that are contrasted with each other. Daniel emphasises the glory and the might of Nebuchadnezzar and the way that the lord humbled him in the events of chapter 4, the lord thereby demonstrating his rule in the affairs of men. Belshazzar failed to learn the lessons from his maternal grandfather's experience. His sins were more egregious than those of his grandfather. He had lifted himself up against the lord himself, defiled the vessels of his temple, and employed them in acts of idolatry.

James Jordan notes that the shifting of the order of the metals in verse 23 from the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone to silver and gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone is an indication that the silver and the gold, the silver of Medo-Persia, and the gold of Babylon have switched positions.

Belshazzar and Babylon with him have lost their power and in their place is rising the kingdom of Medo-Persia. This introductory statement is an important part of helping us to understand what comes later, the interpretation of the riddle. To most readers of Daniel chapter 5, the writing on the wall may receive little attention. There are four words on the wall and for some reason Belshazzar and his wise men are unable to read them. The English Bible reader might speculate that these were words written in a language that Belshazzar and his wise men couldn't understand. The connection between the words and their interpretation might also seem somewhat opaque. Perhaps the four words are simply headings for a prophetically revealed message that cannot be deduced from them. Daniel's interpretation is considerably longer than the words themselves, so we might presume he must be adding a lot of information to what is given in the writing itself. Then, if we do look closer, other puzzles emerge.

[16 : 56] For instance, why is the word mene repeated? Or why does the plural parson become pera's singular in the solution? The first thing that we need to recognise is that the words written on the wall would have likely been a consonantal text without vowels and likely without spaces either. If you imagine receiving a text in English without vowels and without spaces, you can imagine that it would be very difficult to interpret and exceedingly difficult if you didn't have any sort of clear context.

There were many different ways that you could divide the words of the writing on the wall to derive some sort of message from it, and no clear way to narrow down its possible meanings. A solution to the riddle of its meaning would need to stand out so clearly from other candidates that its truth would become apparent. Daniel's solving of the riddle begins by reading the text itself, broken into its component words, mene, mene, tekem and parson. The first word mene, tekem and parson, three nouns, all refer to a particular type of thing, weights. The second mene, however, might not be a repetition of the weight, but the passive participle, it has been weighed. The first, mene, is a minor, or 60 shekels. The second, tekem, is a shekel. The third, pere's, written in the plural form of parson, is half of a weight, either half of a minor or half of a shekel. As I will argue, it seems to be taken in both of these senses in different ways in Daniel chapter 5. At one point it is the half weight of a minor, at another point the half weight of a shekel. The riddle is a multi-stage puzzle, and in breaking it down into these words and recognising that they refer to a process of weighing or assessing,

Daniel has unlocked the first stage. The interpretation that Daniel arrives at is much more elaborate than this, however, and contains a lot more information, so we need to consider what other steps might have taken him there. Daniel does seem to exercise some prophetic insight in this passage.

He mentions the hand sent from God that wrote upon the wall, even though the text doesn't record Daniel being informed about how the writing came to be there. Nevertheless, there is no statement here that the Lord informed Daniel of the meaning of the handwriting on the wall. Daniel is renowned for his skill in interpreting visions, dreams, and solving riddles. He has a divine gift, but this gift need not mean that he is privy to revealed information that others lack in this instance. Nowhere here does Daniel say that he has a crucial part of the puzzle that others lack, as if the handwriting were merely a fragment of a larger revelation. No, he presents his message as an interpretation of what is written.

We should be able to trace the stages by which Daniel arrived at his interpretation, and the stages by which others could have followed his interpretation, recognising it to be the correct one. James Bajan, drawing together work from Al Walters, James Jordan, and others, has written an extensive and profoundly illuminating exploration of Daniel's solution to this riddle, which provides the basis for much of my treatment. The ground story of the solution is the identification of the three nouns.

[19 : 58] How did Daniel get to the next story? By taking the root consonants of the three nouns that he had identified, he identifies three verbs corresponding to the three nouns. He then, working on this next story of interpretation, expounds those verbs. Mene corresponds with a verb for to weigh or value, from which he determines the meaning, God has valued your kingdom. Tekel corresponds with a verb for to weigh, whose meaning he expounds as, you've been weighed in the balances. Perez corresponds with a verb for to divide or distribute, yielding, your kingdom has been divided. This still leaves us with the question of how Daniel moved from the verbs he identified to his interpretations. The staircase by which Daniel ascended to the highest story of his interpretation was a final transformation of the root letters.

Having identified the three nouns and the initial three verbs, he recognised a third form of the roots, which made it possible for him to solve the entire riddle. These third forms themselves aren't given to us in the text, but they can be deduced from Daniel's interpretations, in which the key terms cast the shadow of synonymous words and expressions. The first part, corresponding to Mene, is he has entrusted it to you. The synonymous verb is usually translated finished or brought to an end, but is elsewhere used in the sense of paying over, in the sense of completing or performing a transaction. The second part, corresponding to Tekel, is you're too light. The third and final part, corresponding to Perez, is twofold, a verb to give the meaning it has been allocated, and the noun Persia. As Carol Newsome notes, the text could easily have given us the key terms related to the original consonants that would have revealed how Daniel arrived at his interpretation. However, by giving us synonyms instead, it gives us enough to discover them, while veiling them to all but the most attentive readers of the text, who are thereby rewarded with the satisfaction of insight. The handwriting on the wall sets up what

Newsome calls the governing trope of someone using scales. On the one side of the scales is a minor weight, the weight of the kingdom of Babylon that God has entrusted to Belshazzar, which he had inherited from Nebuchadnezzar, with whom Daniel has just unfavourably contrasted Belshazzar at length. This is then the meaning of the first line, the interpretation of Mene. The weighty kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar has been weighed out and entrusted to Belshazzar. The second line, the interpretation of Tekel, places Belshazzar himself on the scales, weighing him against the weight of the kingdom committed to him. Belshazzar, however, is an extreme lightweight, only one shekel, a sixtieth of what Nebuchadnezzar was.

As Bajan observes, such comparisons of persons with relative weights are found elsewhere in the literature of the period. The insufficiency of this shekel-weight man for this minor-weight kingdom presents a problem that is solved in the third line, the interpretation of Perez. Perez relates to the plural parson, to the verbs for division and allocation, and to the proper noun of Persia.

If Belshazzar is too light, then two half-miners, the Medes and the Persians, will do the job, as the kingdom is divided and allocated to them. We can see then that in terms of this interpretation, there are three stages to the story. In the past, there is the weighing out of the kingdom of Babylon and entrusting it to Belshazzar. In the present, there is the judging and weighing of Belshazzar himself and finding him wanting. This is in the context of the test of jealousy, as he drinks from the vessels of the temple before the lampstand of the Lord. The final stage concerns the future. The kingdom that he has will be divided to people who are sufficient for it, the Medes and the Persians, these two half-miners. We can appreciate then that the weights are integral to the meaning of the riddle. Fittingly, these events occurred just as Libra was rising over Babylon, as Al-Waltus notes. Libra was known in Aramaic literature as the scales, and that word is at the heart of Daniel's interpretation. As we know that astrologers were at the scene, it seems unlikely that this connection would have passed them by. If we get into the gematria of the three-by-three block of consonants that compose the riddle, the gematria being the sum of the numerical values associated with the letters, Bidjan suggests that we can see the identities of Cyrus, Darius, the Watchers, the King, and Belshazzar himself all alluded to, with the same sum of the letters in the first row and the first column, 91. That number corresponds with only two proper nouns in the book,

[24 : 32] God and the King. It also equals the sum of the weights in shekels. A minor, 60, a shekel, 1, and a half minor, or Perez, 30, totalling 91. It is also the same number as the number of letters in Daniel's statement and the interpretation of the riddle together. Elements of our interpretation of a biblical passage could be compared to branches on a tree. Some aspects of our interpretations are like the trunk, which is robust, central, and certain. Others are like larger branches, which can support a lot of weight. However, as you venture out further, branches can become a lot thinner and less suitable for resting much weight upon. This is a chapter with a riddle at the heart of it that invites a lot of careful and deep reading. Yet certain of these speculations about levels of meaning in the riddle of the handwriting on the wall can bear much more weight than others. Nevertheless, even though we should hold certain speculative interpretations very tentatively, recognising ways in which they could be weak, it is always valuable to get an appreciative sense of how full the tree of the text's meaning might actually be.

By interpreting the riddle, Belshazzar perhaps thinks that Daniel has diffused it in some way, giving him the means to avoid it. He exalts Daniel to a position of high office, just as Joseph was exalted by Pharaoh back in Genesis. This is yet another example of the parallels between Joseph and Daniel in this book. However, Belshazzar's fate is not so easily avoided. That very night he is killed, and his place is taken by Darius the Mede. This Median king receives the kingdom, just as the sentence of the handwriting on the wall announced. Darius the Mede is 62 years of age when he receives the kingdom.

It is very rare for us to be given the age of a pagan king. Indeed, no other instances of this happening in scripture come to mind. It's worth reflecting upon why this number is given to us. Later on in the book, we find the number 62 used in the context of the 70 weeks of years in chapter 9.

This might suggest that the events of the first year of Darius' reign that follow are a means of assisting the attentive reader in interpreting the events of the final week of the 70 weeks of years. A further thing to note is that if we take the Perez half-weight to be a half-weight of a shekel rather than a half-weight of a minor, the total of the weights in the handwriting on the wall comes to 62. 60 is a minor, a shekel is one, and then the two half-shekels come to one shekel, bringing us to 62 shekels in total. This 62-year-old Darius the Mede, then, is marked out as suitable for the kingdom. The equivalence of his age to the sum of the weights suggests that he is the one who is going to bring balance.

A question to consider. In the opening narrative chapters of the book of Daniel, the shadow of the Tower of Babel hangs over much of the proceedings. What are some of the ways that we can see the story of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel in the background of this chapter?

[27:25] !