

Daniel 5:1-31, No. 9
“The Handwriting on the Wall”
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Some years have passed since the events recorded in chapter 4 and Daniel is now an older man. We wonder what his life was like through those long years. He was there at the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign and was there to the end. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C. after a reign of forty-three years. How quickly it all came to nothing! He was succeeded by his son Amel Marduk, referred to in 2 Kings 25:27 as Evil-Merodach (the name Evil has nothing to do with our word “evil,” of course). This man lasted but a year, being assassinated by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar, who himself lasted only four years. He was succeeded by his son, Labashi-Marduk, who lasted just a month before being assassinated by a conspiracy that put Nabonidus on the throne. He reigned until the end of the Babylonian empire in 539. So Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon.

For a long time the presence of Belshazzar here in chapter 5 was thought to be an example of the historical inaccuracy of the biblical history. However as Babylonian documents were unearthed and translated much more was learned about the last years of the Babylonian empire. Belshazzar was the son of Nabonidus and functioned as vice-regent under his father. Nabonidus was the king, and always referred to as the king, but he spent comparatively little time in the capital. From 553 to 539, some fourteen years, his son Belshazzar functioned as the *de facto* ruler in his absence. It appears that the reason may have been religious. Nabonidus was a passionate devotee of the moon god Sin, the chief god of his ancestral homeland, Haran. He was no monotheist but his devotion to Sin angered the Marduk priesthood in Babylon. It is not certain but Nabonidus may have spent the last ten years of his reign at Teima, an oasis in what is now Saudi Arabia some 550 miles south of Babylon, not because he was protecting the trade route with his army, but because he had been forced to leave the capital. Perhaps even his son Belshazzar had a part in his ouster. No one knows for sure but that Nabonidus remained king but did not rule from Babylon itself is known to be a fact. Belshazzar was the functioning ruler in the capital itself.

Interestingly, Belshazzar, since he was not the titular king of Babylon, seems to have been forgotten quite quickly. He is not known to the historians Herodotus in the 5th century B.C. or Xenophon in the 4th century. That makes it harder to believe that some Jewish writer in the 2nd century B.C. would have known that Belshazzar was actually the one in charge in Babylon, even though he was not the king, and that Nabonidus was not present in the city. This is surely one argument against a 2nd century date and for a 6th century date for Daniel.

Text Comment

- v.1 Remember, Daniel is not a history of Babylon but a message for the people of God. There is no need to rehearse the dismal history of the Babylonian royal house from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar. The important thing is to continue with the book’s demonstration that “in spite of appearances God is in control.” Accordingly we plunge into the action *in medias res*, with no introduction of the *dramatis personae* or the historical setting.

In a stroke of literary genius, the author does not describe the larger scene. We do not learn until the very end of the chapter that the city was, at that very moment, threatened by the Persian army. Was this banquet something like Hitler's birthday party in the bunker hours before his suicide? Or were they so confident that Babylon's walls and water-defenses were impregnable, that since the Euphrates River flowed through the city there was no need to fear a loss of the water supply, and that the city was sufficiently well-stocked with provisions – so says the historian Herodotus – that they believed themselves safe from attack, no matter the presence of the enemy? But whether or not they realized it, Babylon's *Gotterdammerung* was at hand. Herodotus tells us that Cyrus, the Persian king, had defeated Nabonidus and the Babylonian army just a few days before in a battle fought some fifty miles from the capital. Almost certainly there was a climate of fear and uncertainty. Perhaps the banquet was meant to encourage the Babylonian leadership to hang tough. Given the heavy drinking, I'm personally more inclined to think the scene is nearer that of Hitler's bunker.

- v.4 It is not said if vessels taken from other foreign temples seized during the period of Babylon's conquests were also brought for the use of the revelers. What matters is that Belshazzar was abusing the vessels that had been dedicated to the worship of Yahweh, the living God. He used *his* goblets to toast the false gods of the ancient near eastern world. That was to spit in Yahweh's face! [Longman, 137] That is how Daniel understood what Belshazzar had done, as we will read in v. 23. "[Belshazzar] had lifted himself up against the Lord of heaven." As Ralph Davis puts it, contempt for God's "stuff" is a form of contempt for God. [74] Perhaps Belshazzar's idea was to demonstrate to his assembled guests how great Babylon's power still was by showing off her conquests. But it may be that as the crowd got drunker, it just seemed to be a way to add to the hilarity, to drink from captured goblets.

Clearly there is some sarcasm at the end of v. 4. Let such gods as these rescue Belshazzar.

- v.5 It is not said in so many words, but any reader of Daniel would immediately know that the hand was God's. Not God's literal hand, of course, but a hand he had created and was using to reveal his will. Throughout the OT the acts of God are sometimes referred to as the acts of "God's hand" or even "of God's fingers," as, for example, when the Ten Commandments were written on the stone tablet by "the finger" of God. The phrase "opposite the lampstand" is an eyewitness touch.
- v.6 As with Nebuchadnezzar's dreams, this was so unprecedented it terrified Belshazzar. Perhaps he divined that it was unlikely to be good news. The throne room of the king of Babylon has been excavated and, while the walls are not intact, enough was left to show that they were coated with white gypsum, which would have made the writing clear to all. [Longman, 138]

- v.7 To be third in the kingdom would be higher than all but Nabonidus and Belshazzar himself. Another historical detail unlikely to have been known by a second century author.
- v.9 By this point in the book we've grown used to the idea that the wise men of Babylon are a broken reed, useless in a pinch.
- v.10 Once again, this woman is not identified. Since Belshazzar's wives and concubines have already been said to be present, presumably this is the queen mother, often an important court figure in the ancient world. It is thus possible, though not certain, that this was Nebuchadnezzar's wife, Nitocris, who, of course, would remember Daniel's contribution to her husband's life and career very well and is known to have been a woman known for her wisdom.
- v.12 She described Daniel in much the same way Nebuchadnezzar had. Her words suggest impatience with Belshazzar. He should have known to call Daniel himself. By the way, Daniel may well not have been summoned in part because of his age. Supposing he was only 20 when taken from Jerusalem. Add the 43 years of Nebuchadnezzar and the twenty-three years of so since Nebuchadnezzar's death and he is now about 80. He was not inactive. We learn in 8:27 that he was still an official at court during Belshazzar's reign. He had been quietly continuing to work for Babylon's peace and prosperity as Jeremiah had told the exiles to do. I suppose by now the good man had given up all hope of ever returning to the Promised Land.
- v.13 His reference to Daniel being a Jewish exile seems to have been intended to put him in his place.
- v.16 Twice he says that *he had heard* that Daniel could do this or that. Obviously Daniel has not been in the limelight in recent years. And his final "if you can read the writing..." suggests that he doesn't necessarily think Daniel can do any such thing.
- v.17 We don't detect in Daniel's words the same respect and even affection for Belshazzar that Daniel had obviously felt for Nebuchadnezzar. He was unimpressed with the gifts Belshazzar was offering him and promised to provide the interpretation free of charge. Belshazzar would not have been in the habit of anyone talking to him as Daniel did here.
- v.23 In other words, Belshazzar was no Nebuchadnezzar and it doesn't sound as if Daniel had any hopes for this second-rate monarch. The mighty Nebuchadnezzar had made an empire; Belshazzar could only throw a party. Nabonidus was with the army in the field; Belshazzar was home drinking with his friends. He brought to the party the vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from a faraway temple, but had conquered no distant nations himself. But if Nebuchadnezzar, who had been a great king, had had to be humbled, how much more Belshazzar, a petty tyrant who rode another's coattails to power! [Duguid, 82]

- v.25 The three words are nouns, the first repeated for emphasis. As nouns they are units of money and so could be translated accordingly: mina, mina, shekel, and a half. Daniel however takes the nouns and interprets them as passive participles, based on verbal roots suggested by the nouns. The three words thus become: numbered, weighed, and divided. [Longman, 141] Or, if you prefer, in another's telling: finished, flimsy, and fractured. [Davis, 77] The morphology and syntax are complicated and understood somewhat differently, but this is the general idea.
- v.31 What happened, according to Herodotus, was that the Persians, by means of a canal, diverted the course of the river sufficiently to lower the water level to the depth of a man's thigh. That enabled what we would call today commandos or Special Forces to enter the city under the walls and surprise the defenders.

We will deal with the problem of Darius the Mede next time, a name that is not found in independent sources and has long been thought by liberal scholarship to be an obvious error. However, even here, the fact that he is said to have been 62 when he seized power suggests that the author knew about this man. D.J. Wiseman, one of the most authoritative of the 20th century scholars of the ancient near east argued that Darius was simply another name for Cyrus. Others suggest that he was Cyrus' commanding general. We'll talk about that next time. Remember, it was Cyrus' rule over Babylon that led to the return of the Jewish exiles to the Promised Land.

We take this for granted in biblical narrative, but it is important enough for us to think about. The story is told by what scholars refer to as an omniscient narrator. Whoever the author of the account was – and we don't know that the Book of Daniel was written by Daniel himself – he describes the action and the speeches and also provides an interpretation of the events. He knows what happened when Daniel wasn't present. He knows what happened at the banquet. He even describes in some detail the physical response of Belshazzar to the writing on the wall. He knows what happened when Daniel arrived and what God's prophet said. He knows what happened during the evening in the palace and what happened later that same night. He writes his account in the third person: Belshazzar did this, Daniel said that, the Persians did this, and so on. The story is not told from Daniel's perspective but from the narrator's. This approach gives us great confidence in the accuracy of the report, but it also invites our involvement in the story as readers. The narrator tells us something things, but not others. He doesn't tell us why the banquet was held, or who the queen was who recommended Daniel. We aren't told why the Babylonian wise men couldn't read the inscription or how the Persians made it through the capital's defenses. This "reticence" on the narrator's part peaks our curiosity and encourages us to think more deeply about what happened that night in Babylon. [Longman, 144-145]

And surely it is remarkable that when unbelieving biblical scholarship began to cast doubt on the historical accuracy of this history, the narrator should have been proved right at the key points by further archaeological discoveries. But what does the narrator want us to carry away from this chapter? What is its importance? What is its lesson or lessons? Well, of course, the great lesson of the book is powerfully reinforced by this piece of history. It was written for a subject people to encourage them to keep faith with God. And it powerfully reminded them that "in spite of appearances, God is control, which we have said is the great lesson in the Book of Daniel. Even

the rise and fall of empires and kings take place according to his plan and purpose. God knew what was to come, what would happen to Belshazzar himself and to Babylon, because he had ordered events according to his will.

But the way the account unfolds in chapter 5 lays specific emphasis on the fact that woven into the unfolding drama of ancient near eastern history was the judgment of God upon individuals and nations. Babylon fell because God judged it for its sins. The prophets of the Old Testament taught us that in a number of places. And Belshazzar himself was likewise judged and punished. Verse 30's "that very night" lumps Belshazzar in with the rich man in the Lord's parable who was planning to build bigger barns but died *that very night*. [Davis, 81] When Nebuchadnezzar found himself face to face with divine judgment he repented and humbled himself. Belshazzar did not. Or, perhaps, he had already passed the spiritual point of no return. That is, no real opportunity for repentance was given him – he was killed that very night – because he was past repentance. It is interesting and important that while Nebuchadnezzar spoke with reverence of Daniel as a man in whom the spirit of the holy gods dwelled, and so did the Queen in chapter 5, Belshazzar clearly thought of Daniel as simply a Jewish exile with some special powers who might be willing to help him if he paid him a sufficient sum. He may have heard that the spirit of the gods dwelled in Daniel, but it provoked no reverence on Belshazzar's part. He was ready to pay for an accurate interpretation, but there is nothing in the chapter to suggest that Belshazzar was ready to face the implications of the message that God had sent him.

Ralph Davis includes in his comment on the interplay between Belshazzar and Daniel the delightful anecdote from the life of T.E. Lawrence, the famous Lawrence of Arabia. Lawrence was a friend of the English poet Thomas Hardy and sometimes visited the Hardys in their home. I had forgotten that after his heroics in the First World War, the events that made him famous, Lawrence retired from the public eye and served as an enlisted man in the Royal Air Force, an admittedly strange thing for a famous public figure to do. On one occasion during this time he was visiting the Hardys and they happened to also be entertaining the wife of the mayor of Dorchester, a woman with upper crust ideas and prejudices. She was offended that she found herself sitting at the dinner table with an enlisted man. Utterly unaware of the identity of the soldier at her side, she turned to Mrs. Hardy and said, in French, that never in all her born days had she had to sit down to tea with a private soldier. There was no response until Lawrence himself responded, in perfect French: "I beg your pardon, Madame, but can I be of any use as an interpreter? Mrs. Hardy knows no French." The proud woman, like Belshazzar, had disdained, and so was exposed by the only person at the table who understood what was going on. [76]

Belshazzar disdained Daniel – a mere Jewish exile – the only one who could explain what had happened and why. And we can't help but wonder what Belshazzar's response to Daniel's interpretation of the hand-writing was. He apparently didn't disbelieve it since he gave Daniel the presents he had promised. Daniel took them, we suppose, because he couldn't really refuse and he knew very well that they wouldn't belong to him for but a few hours longer in any case. But we certainly are given no indication that Belshazzar fell to his knees and begged Daniel to tell him what he must do to be saved!

Two phrases have entered the common speech of the world from this single chapter in Daniel. First the phrase "the handwriting is on the wall," which means that indications are strong that

certain events are to be expected, almost always unwelcome events. The phrase might be used to face the officials of a company with the fact that they are bankrupt and have no means of turning round their financial position. The second is “your days are numbered,” which means you haven’t much time. The bankruptcy, in our example, is coming more quickly than you imagined.

Belshazzar and Babylon had been at the top of the world. We forget, however, that it was only for a mere half century that they ran the ancient near eastern world. They were for a time the image of personal and national success. But the handwriting was on the wall and their days were numbered. How easily such phrases may be transferred to our own time and to equivalent people, nations, and cultures. Their days are numbered; the handwriting is on the wall. Of course, no one had figured this out when it was still possible to do something about it. It took a divine revelation of such an arresting nature that no one could ignore it.

How like this the world has always been and how like it our world today. The handwriting is on the wall and the days are numbered, but our modern Belshazzars are hardly going to hear that from us! We don’t command their respect. The only revelation we have to show them is the Word of God, the Bible. There was plenty that should have helped Belshazzar – after all, Daniel was still there in his court – he could have told Belshazzar exactly what God expected the man to do – but he paid no attention, as people pay no attention today to the revelation of God in nature, in their own hearts, and in the Word of God. And, take note. It is not simply Babylon whose days were numbered; it was Belshazzar personally. Most of Daniel’s speech in vv. 17-23 is directed to Belshazzar himself. *He* had not humbled himself; *he* had not honored the living God.

We must never forget this. It is, after all, one of the two principle proclamations of the Word of God: the world and the people in it are under a sentence of death. They are, by the day and by the year, drawing nearer to the judgment of God. Their days are numbered; the handwriting is on the wall. And, of course, if world history is anything to go by, there is evidence aplenty that this is, in fact, the fate of every empire and of vast numbers of individual human beings. There is, of course, God be praised, salvation to those who believe and honor the Lord, but only to those! And that means, of course, that Christians should know better than to be enamored of a world that is about to be destroyed or of things that cannot save, to be living in fear of an empire that lives under the judgment of the Lord. Remember, once again: what we have in chapter 5 *was not written for the Babylonians*. It was written for the people of God! All of those judgments of the Old Testament prophets against Assyria, Babylon, and the other nations of the ancient world weren’t written for those other nations. We’re not even sure any Babylonian ever read them or heard them. They were written for the people of God, so that they would know that their enemies stood under the judgment of God.

Think of Jews whose entire life had been turned upside down by the Babylonians – to be sure, as punishment for their own sins – and of how this account would strike them. Their *bête noire* was finished, even before the seventy years of their captivity had expired! The Jews would survive; Babylon would not. Why? Because the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob rules the world and those who trust in him can be confident of final victory. Sure enough, every individual Jew would not live to see that victory, but that it was coming was a certainty. Through all the vicissitudes of life, through all the confusing disappointments, this is the fact that clarifies all our experience of life and this is foundation of all legitimate hope and confidence. Let’s make this

still more personal and bring it down to the level of our own life in this world, yours and mine. Much of what we experience – much of the difficulty we face, much of the disappointment, many of the fears – after all, come to us through the unbelieving world around us. Our culture is hostile to our convictions, our most precious beliefs, and pays no attention to what we think or say. Our lives are made more difficult because of that world.

Think of Daniel, who is more than simply a prophet. He is also a representative believer. He stands for you and me, he occupies our place in a time of difficulty, disappointment, and temptation. The years had passed for Daniel. Presumably as well for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, but we hear nothing more about them. Most of the time Daniel did his work in Babylon and nothing terribly striking happened day after day and year after year. He gradually went from being a young man to a middle-age man and then to an old man. We will learn in the next chapter that Daniel was faithful at his prayers, never forgot who he was and what he was as a believer in the living God, as a Jew, and as an exile. His conduct, both personal and professional, was exemplary, a sterling example, an adornment of his faith in Yahweh. He was a faithful, competent, highly useful servant of the Babylonian court. But nothing remarkable appears to have happened for some years now. The thrilling days at the end of Nebuchadnezzar's life were more than twenty years behind him and Babylon had moved on, had begun its inexorable decline into political senility, less than half a century after it had become the king of the hill. Daniel, the loyal Jew, had lived his life in Babylon, serving the government, in what way we do not know, but obviously as some form of manager or, as we would say nowadays, a cabinet secretary. He does not appear to have occupied as prominent a position in Belshazzar's government as he had in Nebuchadnezzar. In any case Belshazzar did not rely on him for guidance as Nebuchadnezzar had learned to do. He called Daniel only at the very last and only because of the advice he had been given by the queen mother. Then, suddenly, he was cast into the forefront of events once again. See him entering the banquet hall, an old man, sober, serious, probably wearing a frown of disapproval.

And what was his final service to Babylon and to its government? To declare its doom. *It was a Jew who did that*; an exile. And what must that have meant to the Jews as a people; to have one of their own pronounce the end of Babylon in such an official way, to pronounce it to the king himself, or, at least, to the acting king. The king may have paid little attention to what he heard; he may well have been too drunk to make a serious response, but the Persian army added its own explanation point to Daniel's prophecy that very night.

Once again, Babylon's gods couldn't help. Sin, the moon god, couldn't give victory to Nabonidus no matter how loyal the king had been to Sin; Marduk could do nothing for Babylon itself. Fantasies are powerless before armies. But here was Yahweh once again telling Belshazzar, as he had told Nebuchadnezzar, both what was about to happen and why.

You know and I know that the idols of this world are powerless to save us from the power of death or from the judgment of God. We know this but we are still tempted by those idols every day. You know and I know that, no matter how successful or powerful a person may have been in this world, none of that is going to matter a hill of beans when it is time for him or her to die and to face the judgment. We know these things, but remembering and acting on this truth is our daily challenge.

I've been this past week at the bedside of one of our dear women who appears to be dying. We have spoken much of death and of heaven. It is what Christians ought to be talking about on and around a deathbed. Our faith is all about the future, a happy, wonderful future. We have no way of knowing if things in this world, the world in which you and I, especially you, are going to be living for the next generation, whether these days to come are going to be the same – as they largely were for Daniel – easier or much more difficult. But we do know that ours is a future so wonderful words cannot describe it. And the reality of that is pressed home mightily by the fact that many will never experience *that* future. They have been weighed in the balances and found wanting because they are without that righteousness that satisfies a just and holy God, the righteousness that Christ gives to those who trust in him. Oh, if you and I could see the future, if we could get even a glimpse into hell and heaven, what a difference that would make! If we could see the judgment of God unfolding as one person after another made his or her terrified way to the Great White Throne, how different everything would appear. The Bible has given us here a glimpse, a picture to help us, to inform and strengthen our faith, to remind us that the Lord is both the judge of all men *and* the savior of his people. If he is our friend we have no enemies to speak of! Daniel had nothing to fear and does not appear to have been worried in the slightest. It was *his* God who ruled the world; *his* God who had promised to save his people; *his* God who had written the message of judgment on the wall of the Babylonian palace. And it was his God who had once again proved to his people that he knew their situation and was ordering all things with them in mind.