



# Daniel

דניאל

## Chapter 5

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### **BABYLON FALLS TO CYRUS**

After Nebuchadnezzar died in 563BC, his son Evil-Merodach (in Akkadian “Amel-Marduk”) took over the kingdom. Amel-Marduk immediately released Jehoiachin, the captured Jewish king, from prison, giving him an honorable place at the court (see 2Kings 25:27-30). Was this because his father’s change of heart towards the God of the Jews softened his own attitude?

### **NERIGLISSAR TAKES CHARGE**

Two years later the new king was assassinated by his brother-in-law, General Neriglissar (whose name means “Nergal, protect the king”). He had served under Nebuchadnezzar when Jerusalem was destroyed. His high military spending led to inflation that rose to staggering levels.

### **CIVIL REVOLT AND A NEW KING**

Neriglissar died four years later in 556BC and was succeeded by his son Labashi-Marduk, who lasted only nine months. He was murdered by Nabonidus, the leader of a massive civil revolt. To legitimize his place on the throne, Nabonidus later married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. He was the son of a high priestess of a cult that followed the moon god Sin. His religious views deeply offended the Babylonian priests. The priests are said to have eventually assisted the Persian king Cyrus in his efforts to seize Babylon.

Nabonidus was a weak king, and unpopular at home. He devoted most of his attention to Northern Arabia and Edom, which he conquered in 552. He made his home the city of Teima in Arabia, putting Belshazzar, his son, in charge as co-regent responsible for the province of Babylon and possibly the entire empire.

### **CYRUS MAKES HIS MOVE**

Towards the end of the 550’s Nabonidus had supported a revolt over Astyages, king of the Medes to the north. This revolt was led by the king’s Persian son-in-law, Cyrus (some commentaries say Cyrus was Astyages’ nephew).

Cyrus had also asked for assistance from Lydia but when Lydia’s king Croesus turned him down he simply conquered Lydia, then turned his attention on the Chaldean empire. He swept into the nation from the east and north, quickly subduing cities grown weak under the inept leadership of Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar. He



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destroyed the city of Opis just north of Babylon with considerable destruction and loss of life. A few days later he sized Sippar without a battle.

It was now the beginning of September, the month of Tishri. The heat of the desert gave way to icy cold nights. By now, Nabonidus had retreated south to the city of Teima, while Belshazzar shut himself up inside the impressive walled city of Babylon, a city considered unconquerable. Archeological records show that the Babylonians had brought their idols inside the city walls, a sign that they were preparing for war.

On the 15th of Tishri, Cyrus and his army gathered around Babylon like a cloud, while nobles and officials throughout the city dressed in their finest clothing to attend a gala party organized by the king. That fateful day begins our narrative of Daniel chapter 5.

### **DANIEL 5:1-4**

<sup>1</sup> Belshazzar the king gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine before the thousand.

<sup>2</sup> While Belshazzar was drinking the wine, he commanded to bring in the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem; so that the king, and his officials, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.

<sup>3</sup> So they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God at Jerusalem; and the king and his officials, his wives, and his concubines, drank from them.

<sup>4</sup> As they drank wine, they praised the gods of gold and of silver, of brass, iron, wood and stone.

- A feast for 1,000 nobles is a significant event. It was a sign of defiance against the situation in which the city found itself, facing a hostile army outside the gates of the city. But it was much more than just snubbing their noses against Cyrus.
- Of all the vessels available from all the conquered nations -- many of them quite significant compared to Judah -- why did Belshazzar choose to pick on the Jews? Those vessels had sat in the museum for 47 years. There was something much deeper going on behind this request. It was a public defiance against the God of the Hebrews and the predictions from 150 years earlier that Babylon would be given to Cyrus.



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- Isaiah 45-46 predicted Cyrus by name, indicating that God would use him to conquer Babylon. With an estimated half million Jews living in various parts of the empire, they had most likely been discussing these passages for weeks now with an attitude of eager expectation. No doubt this got back to Belshazzar and he wanted to make a public statement to regain confidence in his leadership. One way to do that would be to publicly humiliate the God of the Jews.

### DANIEL 5:5-9

<sup>5</sup> In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand suddenly appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace near the lampstand. The king watched the part of the hand that wrote.

<sup>6</sup> Then the king's face became pale, and he became so frightened that the joints of his loins shook and his knees knocked together.

<sup>7</sup> The king cried out to bring in the astrologers, Chaldeans and diviners. And the king said to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its meaning, shall be clothed in purple and have a chain of gold placed around his neck, and will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

<sup>8</sup> Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing, nor tell the king what it meant.

<sup>9</sup> So king Belshazzar became even more afraid, and all the color drained from his face, and his nobles were baffled.

- Remember Nebuchadnezzar's "voice from heaven," timed precisely to the second that he lifted up his voice in pride? It seems likely that the hand writing on the wall appeared with uncanny timing, probably at the very moment of an announcement or joke against the God of Israel.
- The Aramaic text describing Belshazzar's reaction is best translated by the quaint KJV. The king was not just shocked, he was terrified beyond ordinary fear. The God he had just mocked moments earlier had suddenly made His presence known before the king and his guests in a dramatic, powerful way.
- Belshazzar could offer no rank higher than "third highest ruler" because he himself was just second, after his father Nabonidus.
- A lampstand is mentioned. There were actually many lampstands in the banquet hall, so this reference could mean something significant, such as a Jewish menorah taken from the temple along with the other



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artifacts. Notice also the reference to the hand writing on the plaster of the wall. We know from recent archeology that all the walls of this room except one were covered in glazed blue bricks. One wall was white plaster, making it clear that Daniel was indeed an eyewitness to these events. It also suggests that the hand wrote into the charcoal dust that would have gathered on this white wall from the oil fire of the lampstand. Picture the scene: a mysterious hand appears in thin air and carves letters out of the blackened area of the wall or marks the white plaster. Whichever approach was used, it would have been a startling and frightening event for the audience.

- The king called for his wise men, but Daniel was not among them. He would have been well over 80 years of age by this time. He was probably semi-retired, though he would serve the next king for a short time after Babylon changes hands.
- After the wise men fail to interpret the words on the wall, Belshazzar's face becomes as white as a sheet. He is really terrified and deeply concerned, quite sober by now.

### DANIEL 5:10-16

<sup>10</sup> Now the queen, hearing the commotion of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet house. The queen said, "O king, live forever! Do not let your thoughts trouble you, and don't look so pale.

<sup>11</sup> There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the days of your father, insight and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him. King Nebuchadnezzar your father -- your father the king, I say -- made him chief over the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and diviners;

<sup>12</sup> This man Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar, was found to have an excellent spirit and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain hard riddles and solve difficult problems. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the meaning."

<sup>13</sup> Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel, of the exiles brought by my father out of Judah?"

<sup>14</sup> I have even heard of you, that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that intelligence and insight and excellent wisdom is found in you.



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<sup>15</sup> Now the wise men, the astrologers, were brought before me to read this writing and make known to me the meaning of it. But they could not explain it.

<sup>16</sup> I have heard that you can interpret such things, and solve difficult problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me the meaning of it, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.”

- The queen is a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. Obviously she wasn't at the party. She is very respectful of Daniel, which suggests that she does not support her son's cavalier attitude about the state of the empire.
- The term “father” simply means “ancestral relative” which can include “father-in-law” and even “grandfather.”
- Belshazzar meets Daniel face-to-face for the first time. Isn't it interesting that Belshazzar hasn't even bothered to meet the guy who was in charge of all the wise men of Babylon?

### **DANIEL 5:17-24**

<sup>17</sup> Then Daniel answered the king, “Let your gifts be to yourself, and give your rewards to another. Even so I will read the writing to the king, and tell him what it means.

<sup>18</sup> O king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father a kingdom and majesty and glory and honour.

<sup>19</sup> Because of the high position that he gave him, all people, nations and languages trembled before him and feared him. Those he wanted to kill, he killed. Those he wanted kept alive would live. He promoted whomever he wished to promote, and he humbled those he wanted to humble.

<sup>20</sup> But when his heart was lifted up and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him.

<sup>21</sup> And he was driven from people. His heart was made like that of an animal, and he lived with the wild beasts. They fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; until he knew that the most high God ruled over the kingdom of men and set up over it whomever he wanted.

<sup>22</sup> But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this;



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<sup>23</sup> Instead, you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the vessels of his house brought before you, and you and your nobles, your wives, and your concubines, drank wine from them. And you praised the gods of silver and gold, of brass, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see nor hear, nor know. And you have not glorified the God who holds your breath in his hand, and who has power over all the things you do.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore he sent the part of the hand that wrote this inscription.

- Daniel doesn't care for the trappings offered by the king. But he agrees to interpret the words because their appearance had a purpose beyond simply scaring the king. They are a message from God, meant to be understood, meant to demonstrate the sovereignty of God.
- Before he goes into the explanation, he reminds Belshazzar of the experience that Nebuchadnezzar went through as a result of his prideful heart. He claims that Belshazzar was well aware of this lesson, another suggestion that Nebuchadnezzar's conversion was very real.
- Except for the mention of Nebuchadnezzar's prideful heart getting him in trouble, Daniel is generally quite positive in his description of the former king. He explains that he was an absolute monarch who was given his power and authority as a gift from God.

### DANIEL 5:25-28

"This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN

"This is what these words mean: { Mene } : God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end.

{ Tekel } : You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

{ Peres } : Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

- The inscription was "Mene Mene Tekel Peres." There were no vowels in the language of that time, they were implied. Depending on how you placed vowels, the words could have been viewed as a number of different word combinations.
- Mene means "numbered." God had numbered Belshazzar's reign and today was the end of it.
- Tekel means "weighed."



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- Peres means “to divide” though Daniel used the passive participle “peris” which means “divided.” If you use the “a” instead of the “e” it means “Persia,” so this was meant as a double reference to both division and the Medes and Persians.
- You may be confused by the use of “Upharsin” or “Parsin” used in verse 25 as compared to “Peres” used in verse 28. This is simply the plural form of Peres. Daniel was referring to its double meaning as he explained the writing, including both references in the single word.

### **DANIEL 5:29-31**

Then at Belshazzar’s command, Daniel was clothed in purple, and a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain.

And Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

- Daniel’s interpretation must have troubled Belshazzar, but he followed through with his promise to honor him. Perhaps he thought that God would relent if he treated him well. But it was too late for repentance.

### **CYRUS ENTERS THE CITY**

- It is now past midnight in the early hours of 16th Tishri. At the very time that all these events were taking place, Cyrus’ general Ugbaru, with the help of Babylonian priests wanting to overthrow Nabonidus, had diverted the Euphrates river into a channel dug about eighty years earlier. This caused the moat around Babylon to drop to a level halfway up a man’s thigh. Cyrus’ men slipped quietly into the city underneath the huge gates all around Babylon (there were about 100 gates).
- Cyrus would boast for years that he had conquered Babylon -- the world’s strongest fortress city -- without a battle. The inhabitants of the central part of the city didn’t know they had been conquered for about three days. In just a few hours, an empire has changed hands.
- General Ugbaru died just a month or so later. Cyrus appointed a man named Gubaru as governor over Babylon. The names are similar and thus cause much confusion. Though there is some disagreement about Darius, it appears most likely that this was the name given to Gubaru. A Babylonian tablet from 535BC contains an inscription that reads “the guilt of a sin against Gubaru, the Governor of Babylon and the district beyond the river... (the area west of the Euphrates).” The name Darius is actually a title as well meaning “the royal one.”