

# LESSON 17

It was bad enough when Nebuchadnezzar looted the temple and stole the gold and silver vessels, but now Belshazzar and his friends are using them in a drunken feast while they praise their false gods and idols.

The Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon, both tell us that a banquet was in progress on the night Babylon fell. The date would have been October 12, 539 BC, about thirty or forty years after the events of Chapter 4. Daniel is now in his eighties.

What was going on outside the city during this feast? The Persian armies were camped outside the city walls. According to the Nabonidus Chronicle, the Babylonians had suffered a crushing defeat just days before at the hands of the Persians, and Nabonidus (Belshazzar's father) had fled. Only the city of Babylon remained unconquered. The Nabonidus Chronicle also says that the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without any battle, which as we will see is precisely what Daniel 5 also tells us.

What was the purpose of this feast? Was it to rally and encourage the leaders? Was it to give the people a diversion in the face of the Persian onslaught? Was it to eat and drink today for tomorrow we die? Perhaps it was a bit of all three. Perhaps Belshazzar was simply trying to drown his fears with alcohol. Verse 1 says that Belshazzar drank wine, or more accurately, "tasted the wine." Some commentaries say that this phrase refers to a ritual that preceded the feast in which the king tasted the wine. But others think that "tasting the wine" is just a euphemism for saying that the king was drunk — which seems to fit the context very well.

Perhaps the feast was intended to build morale and encourage the king's people — to show the king's confidence in the face of the Persians. After all, the walls of the city likely seemed invincible, and the Euphrates River ran through the city; so there was an ample water supply. Herodotus tells us that the city had been stocked with enough food to last for many years.

Or, perhaps when news of Nabonidus' defeat at Sippar fifty miles to the north and his subsequent flight two days earlier became known in Babylon, Belshazzar may have moved quickly to proclaim himself the *first* ruler of the empire, the *de facto* king (with Nabonidus being moved to the *second* slot). If so, then the festival may have been a celebration of Belshazzar's coronation.

Or, perhaps the Babylonians were simply observing a customary festival that happened to fall on this day. Xenophon and Herodotus appear to support that view.

Why were the Jewish temple vessels used? First, notice how the vessels mentioned in the first chapter (written in *Hebrew*) play a prominent role in this event from the fifth chapter (written in *Aramaic*). It is this type of evidence that causes even liberal scholars to agree that Daniel was written by a single author even though two different languages were used.

It seems clear (especially from verse 23) that Belshazzar made a deliberate decision to challenge and blaspheme the God of Israel. Why? Perhaps Belshazzar wanted to show that he was greater than Nebuchadnezzar. In effect, he may have been saying to God, "You may have humbled Nebuchadnezzar, but you will never humble me!"

Also, Belshazzar may have already known about the prophecies of his defeat. In Chapter 8, we will see that in the third year of Belshazzar's reign Daniel had prophesied about Babylon's fall to the Persians. Also, Isaiah had mentioned Cyrus, the Persian king, **by name** 150 years before he conquered Babylon (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1). Belshazzar may have been challenging those prophecies by using the temple vessels during his drunken feast.

**Daniel 5:5-6**

**5 In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote.**  
**6 Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.**

Suddenly, at the height of Belshazzar's blasphemy, drunkenness, and immorality, the revelry stops. No trumpet blast, no earthquake, no fanfare. Just the fingers of a hand that appear, write four words (two of which are identical), and then vanish — leaving only the words on the wall.

The reference to the “fingers” of God should not surprise us. Although God is a Spirit (John 4:24), God's actions are frequently described metaphorically as the acts of his hand. In response to the plagues, the Egyptian magicians remarked, “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19). Exodus also describes the commandments as written by God's finger on the stone tablets (Exodus 31:18). The heavens themselves are “the work of [his] fingers” (Psalm 8:3).

As the king gazes at the words, his color changes, his limbs give way, and his knees knock together. The word “color” or “countenance” in verse 6 literally means “brightness.” That is, his bright looks, his cheerfulness, and his hilarity were

changed. Literally, the text says that “the joints of his loin were loosened,” which may suggest various other symptoms of extreme panic (which we won’t go into)!

One early commentator wrote:

Belshazzar had as much of power and of drink withal to lead him to bid defiance to God as any ruffian under heaven; and yet when God, as it were, lifted up his finger against him, how poorly did Belshazzar crouch and shiver. How did his joints loose, and his knees knock together!

The archaeologist Koldewey, who led a number of excavations at Babylon beginning in March 1899, may have discovered the very room where this event took place. Off the largest of the five courtyards in the king’s palace was a huge chamber with three entrances that Koldewey identified as the throne room. Koldewey reports:

It is so clearly marked out for this purpose [as a throne-room] that no reasonable doubt can be felt as to its having been used as their principal audience chamber. If any one should desire to localize the scene of Belshazzar’s eventful banquet, he can surely place it with complete accuracy in this immense room.

Along one of the long walls, as Koldewey described it, was a niche opposite the entrance in which Koldewey suggests the king’s throne stood. Koldewey tells us that the walls of the throne room “were washed over with white gypsum.” Verse 5 tells us that the wall was covered with plaster.

Now how would the author of Daniel have known this fact if he had been writing from Palestine hundreds of years after this time as the liberal critics ask us to believe?

**Daniel 5:7-9**

**7 The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. 8 Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof. 9 Then was king Belshazzar greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed in him, and his lords were astonished.**

The king calls out loudly or “with strength.” It is easy to picture him screaming for his wise men — and no doubt these so-called wise men will prove just as effective as they have the other times they have been summoned! It is not clear who else in the room saw the words, which may explain why the room was still noisy enough that the king had to shout.

Belshazzar promises to make the interpreter the *third* ruler in the kingdom. Why the third? Because that is all Belshazzar could promise. He himself was the second ruler, and his father Nabonidus was the first ruler (or perhaps vice versa). The top two slots were already taken!

It would be helpful if the liberals who see mistakes around every corner in the Bible would bother to read the Bible that they love to attack. If they did, then they would discover that Daniel knew perfectly well that Belshazzar was not the only king in Babylon at this time.

The wise men could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Why couldn't the king's advisors read or interpret this message? Many theories have been advanced to explain why the king's wise men could not read this message or interpret it. (Why they could not *interpret* it is easier to explain than why they could not *read* it.)

### QUESTION 1

What *language* were the words written in? Most commentators think that the words were written in Aramaic because that is the language used in Chapter 5. But others argue that the wise men would have been able to read the words had they been written in Aramaic, and verse 8 tells us they could not read the writing.

But verses 25-28 suggest very strongly that the words were in fact written in Aramaic — those verses give us the actual Aramaic words. If they were written in another language, then verses 25-28 must be giving us the Aramaic translations of the words, but that seems an odd conclusion in view of verse 25: "And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN." Also, there is some word play involved with the final of the four words, and that word play likely would not have come across in a different language.

But if the words were in Aramaic, then why couldn't the wise men read them? We will come back to that question in a moment.

Others think that the words were written in Hebrew. If true, this would explain why the wise men could not read the language. This is a popular view, but it means that verse 25 is not giving us the actual words that were written, but is instead giving us their Aramaic translations. Even so, that is a possible explanation.

Other suggestions include the Phoenician language and an unknown language known only to Daniel. There is no evidence for either of those suggestions.

I think the description of these events in Chapter 5 strongly suggests that the words were written in Aramaic. Hebrew is the next best option, but I think the most likely answer is Aramaic — and that the actual words written on the wall are the four Aramaic words found in verse 25.

## **QUESTION 2**

If the language was Aramaic, then how can we explain why the wise men were not able to read it?

According to Jewish tradition, the letters were not comprehensible because they were written vertically, forming an anagram, instead of horizontally. Others suggest that they were written with unusually shaped characters. Others think that only the first letters of the words may have been given, or that the words may have been jumbled.

Also, vowels were not written with consonants in Aramaic so even if the *letters* were understood, it might be impossible to read them absent context.

Some suggest that the wise men were stricken with blindness, but the king was apparently also unable to read the message, and he was certainly able to see the writing on the wall.

In short, all we know is that the wise men could not read or understand the words — we are not told why.

This event gives us a wonderful example of the unity of the Bible. The Bible was written by many different authors over about 1500 years — but each writer was inspired by God, and so we see a unity throughout the Bible, from the first book written to the last book written. There are no contradictions. As the plan of God is revealed from the beginning to the end of the Bible, we see a single unified message.

**Wayne Jackson:** One of the truly astounding features of the Bible is the fact that these 66 documents, written over a span of some 1,600 years (from at least 1500 BC to AD 100), all fit together in such a stunningly coordinated pattern. Every book has its place and its unique contribution to make to the body of sacred literature. ... A magnificent chorus of three-score and six masterpieces, collectively providing evidence of our great Creator and his redemptive love for humanity.

How do we see that in Daniel 5? The Babylonian Empire was coming to an *end* this very night — and what was happening? There was confusion about language. How did Babylon *begin*? With a confusion of language in Genesis 11:1-9. God took them out the way they came in! They had not learned their lesson.

No one who studies the Bible can fail to see that one author is behind it all — and not just in writing it, but also in doing it!

### **Daniel 5:10-12**

**10 Now the queen, by reason of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banquet house: and the queen spake and said, O king, live for ever: let not thy thoughts trouble thee, nor let thy countenance be changed: 11 There is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of thy father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him; whom the king Nebuchadnezz-**

**zar thy father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers; 12 Forasmuch as an excellent spirit, and knowledge, and understanding, interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts, were found in the same Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar: now let Daniel be called, and he will shew the interpretation.**

The queen in verse 10 is not the wife of Belshazzar because verse 2 tells us that Belshazzar's "wives" were already present at the feast and this queen was not initially present at the feast, but came in only later when she heard about the trouble.

So who was she? She must have been a highly prestigious person to enter the banquet hall uninvited. Also, when she arrived, she seems to have taken charge. For these reasons most commentators have identified her as the queen-mother, either the widow of Nebuchadnezzar or the wife of Nabonidus (possibly the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar) or both (if Nabonidus married the widow of Nebuchadnezzar). She was likely the mother of Belshazzar. If she was the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, she may have been the famous Nitocris.

At any rate, this woman had firsthand information about Nebuchadnezzar that would not have been known by a younger wife of Belshazzar, and she seems to have personally witnessed Daniel's earlier activities in Nebuchadnezzar's court. This queen seems to have known a lot about Daniel and his dealings with Nebuchadnezzar. This would be easy to explain if Nebuchadnezzar was her father. No-

tice that even the queen herself refers to Nebuchadnezzar as the *father* of Belshazzar, which suggests she had a very strong link to Nebuchadnezzar.

Whoever this queen was, she was *not* initially at the drunken feast. This suggests that she may have been the real power here since someone was presumably worrying about the Persians who were camped just outside!

Notice that the queen twice referred to Daniel by his personal Hebrew name, Daniel, which suggests she knew him well. Belshazzar, on the other hand, does not seem to have known Daniel. How can that be explained?

It could be that the king had forgotten, that the king did not recognize the now much older Daniel, or that the king was too drunk to remember much of anything. Also, Nebuchadnezzar had died over 20 years ago, and Daniel apparently did not now enjoy the same exalted position he had under Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel likely retired (or perhaps had been forcibly retired) from public life when Nebuchadnezzar died, at which time Daniel was in his sixties.

The appearance of this queen may answer another question from earlier in the chapter — how did Belshazzar know about the temple vessels in the first place? Perhaps his mother told him about the items that her father had brought back from Jerusalem.

Notice in verse 10 that the queen entered the king's presence unbidden. According to Esther 4:11 she could have been put to death for this under the Persian system. Perhaps a similar system was used by the Chaldeans. The translators of the Septuagint thought so because they felt this behavior was so odd that they added a phrase ("The king called the queen on account of the mystery") to explain it.

But is this really that odd if this queen is Belshazzar's mother and the wife of the king? She likely didn't need permission to do anything!

Again we are faced with the question of why Daniel was called *last* and not *first*. Since this happens each time he is called, I am inclined to believe that God was behind it and arranged things so that it would happen this way each time. He seems

to have wanted all of the other wise men to be proved incapable before Daniel was called — and this is just what happened each time.

Here, of course, we have another possibility — the king did not know or remember Daniel, and it was not until the queen entered that he found out about Daniel.

### **Daniel 5:13-16**

**13 Then was Daniel brought in before the king. And the king spake and said unto Daniel, Art thou that Daniel, which art of the children of the captivity of Judah, whom the king my father brought out of Jewry? 14 I have even heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods is in thee, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee. 15 And now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing, and make known unto me the interpretation thereof: but they could not shew the interpretation of the thing: 16 And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet,**

**and have a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be the third ruler in the kingdom.**

Belshazzar relays the story of what has happened and offers Daniel the same rewards he offered the others if he can interpret the writing.

In verse 13, Belshazzar refers to “the king my father.” He is *not* speaking of Nabonidus but of Nebuchadnezzar. Even Belshazzar himself referred to Nebuchadnezzar as his father. It was apparently very important to Nabonidus and Belshazzar both that they legitimize their rule at every opportunity by linking themselves to Nebuchadnezzar. Also, by mentioning Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar gave Daniel an opportunity to give him a little history lesson, which Daniel proceeds to do.

Why did Belshazzar remind Daniel that he was a Jewish exile? What was the king’s purpose? He may have been attempting to intimidate Daniel by reminding him that he was just a lowly captive. (Let’s see how that plan works out for the king!)

Why does Belshazzar use the name “Daniel” rather than the Babylonian name “Belteshazzar” in addressing the prophet? Perhaps because the latter name was so similar to his own name!

### **Daniel 5:17-24**

**17 Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation. 18 O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory,**

**and honour: 19 And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down. 20 But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: 21 And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will. 22 And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; 23 But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and**

**stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified: 24 Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written.**

Why did Daniel refuse the king's gifts? It would not have been wrong to accept them — he had earlier accepted the gifts and favors of Nebuchadnezzar, as had his three friends.

Perhaps Daniel felt that he was too old to get back into government service, which would have been required had he assumed the position that Belshazzar offered. (However, he did serve a role in the Persian government, which took over the very next day!)

The best explanation is that Daniel knew that neither Belshazzar, Belshazzar's rule, nor the Chaldean kingdom over which he ruled was going to last through the night. These promised gifts were meaningless!

Before Daniel interprets the message, he gives the king both a history lesson and a stern reprimand. In verse 19, Daniel reminds Belshazzar that Nebuchadnezzar was an absolute sovereign. He could dispense life and death at his whim — unlike Belshazzar who seems to be much less powerful and mighty. Would Nebuchadnezzar have spent the night in a drunken feast with the enemy camped just outside the city? To paraphrase a famous quote of a Texas senator, Daniel was telling the king: "I knew Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was a friend of mine. You, sir, are no Nebuchadnezzar!" The great Nebuchadnezzar had submitted to God's sovereignty, while Belshazzar, who was hardly worthy to be compared with the earlier king, had not.

The “but” in verse 20 was the turning point in this event from the life of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was great, *but*... He was filled with pride and refused to give the glory to God. But as bad as Nebuchadnezzar’s punishment was, Belshazzar’s punishment was going to be worse. As with any good history teacher, Daniel reminds the king in verse 22 that he already knew all of this but he had not learned from the past.

Do you get the feeling that Belshazzar may already be regretting having summoned Daniel! If he had wondered what could be worse than having his feast interrupted by a writing finger — he is now finding out!

Notice that although Chapter 4 describes Nebuchadnezzar’s seven year humiliation, only in verse 21 here does Daniel divulge that Nebuchadnezzar lived with the “wild donkeys.” That must have been quite a sight!

As for verses 22-23, one commentator said:

There is no finer example of the preacher’s diction in the Bible than this stern and inexorable condemnation.

As we mentioned, in verse 22 Daniel tells the king that he knew all of this. How would Belshazzar have known about Nebuchadnezzar’s humiliation? Certainly rumors about the event would have been known, but evidence suggests that Belshazzar may have seen those events firsthand. Belshazzar served as chief officer during the administration of King Neriglissar in 560 BC according to Babylonian historical texts. That means that the king was old enough to fill a high position in government only two years after Nebuchadnezzar’s death (562 BC). Since Nabonidus was an official in Nebuchadnezzar’s administration, Belshazzar would have lived in Babylon and would have observed personally the last years of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. If true, that would make Daniel’s strong rebuke even more understandable. Belshazzar had seen with his own eyes what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, and yet he had refused to humble himself before God.

**Daniel 5:25-28**

**25 And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. 26 This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. 27 TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. 28 PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.**

Daniel finally interprets (and possibly translates) the four words (three different words) on the wall.

Even if the king could have read the words, they would have been hard to understand. Literally they mean “Numbered, Numbered, Weighed, Divided.” Daniel will need to tell the king (and us) what the words mean.

The first word “MENE” was repeated twice, likely to stress the certainty of its fulfillment. The word means numbered, counted out, or measured. It meant that the years of Belshazzar’s reign had been counted out to their very last one. If he had ever wondered how long he would reign as king (or live, for that matter), he now knew. The count was complete. Both his days and the days of his kingdom were numbered — they were both coming to a swift end.

The third word (and second distinct word) was “TEKEL.” That word means “weighed,” and Daniel explained that Belshazzar had been weighed and found wanting. He did not measure up. He was the classic example of a light-weight ruler! (That description reminds me of what the late William F. Buckley said when

he learned that Geraldo Rivera wanted to be the first reporter to travel into space. He said that would be a great idea because it would allow us to test the effects of weightlessness on weightlessness!)

The fourth word (and third distinct word) was “PHARSIN.” That word means “to divide,” and Daniel says that Belshazzar’s kingdom had been divided and given instead to the Medes and the Persians who were at that time besieging the city. The word “divided” here means “separated” — the kingdom was divided or separated from Belshazzar and given to another.

The “divided” or “shared” or “fragmented” may also refer to the sharing of power by the Medes and Persians. If so, this would further discredit the liberal idea that Daniel thought a *separate* Median kingdom ruled before the Persians took over.

There is a double word play at work with this final word. This fourth word is similar to the word “Persian,” which means that Daniel knew that the kingdom that defeated the Chaldeans was the Medo-Persian kingdom — and not the Medes all by themselves as the liberals suggest.

And the meaning is not that the kingdom was to be divided into two equal parts, and the one part given to the Medes and the other to the Persians, but that the kingdom was to be separated from Belshazzar or that it was to be destroyed or dissolved. In fact, verse 28 specifically states that Belshazzar’s kingdom would be given to the “Medes and Persians,” which proves that the writer of Daniel was well aware that there was no separate Median world empire succeeded by a Persian kingdom.

Why is that so important? Because we saw four worldwide empires in Chapter 2. If the Medes and Persians together make up one of those four kingdoms — then Rome must be the fourth. And we have copies of Daniel from the Dead Sea Scrolls that *predate* the Roman empire. That is why the liberals are forced to argue that Daniel treated the Medes and Persians as separate kingdoms even though even a casual glance at the text of Daniel shows that he did not.

The King James Version has UPHARSIN (rather than PHARSIN) for the fourth word in verse 25, but has PERES for the fourth word in verse 28. Why the difference? The “U” in “UPHARSIN” in the King James Version simply means “and.” Thus, the final word on the wall was “PHARSIN.” PHARSIN means “and they are dividing.” PERES is a passive participle form of the same root word and means “divided.”