

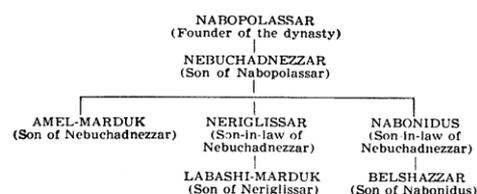
Daniel Chapter Five

Daniel is not a chronological book. He had received visions in the *first* (Daniel 7) and *third* year of king Belshazzar (Daniel 8), but this chapter describes the demise of the Babylonian empire, events which took place in the *fifteenth* year of his reign. The Medes and Persians had already destroyed the forces of Nabonidus and taken him captive in Gorsipa (50 miles south of Babylon). They had surrounded and besieged Babylon for a number of months, but the walls made it virtually impregnable. Now the day of its fall had finally come (see notes on v.30). The chapter is therefore a *preliminary* fulfilment of the prophecies of *Isaiah* (13.17-22; 21.1-10) and *Jeremiah* (51.33-58) who spoke of Babylon's demise in a night of pleasure and drunkenness.

Given the significant historical events of the chapter, it can be accurately dated to October 539BC. Approximately 30 years have passed since the events of Daniel 4, and the 70 years captivity are nearing completion (536BC). Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son *Awel-Marduk* (Evil-Merodach) who lasted two years before being assassinated by his brother-in-law, *Neriglissar* (Nergal-Sharezer). Following his death, his teenage son *Labashi-Marduk* reigned for nine months before being murdered by conspirators, one of which appointed *Nabonidus* as king. It is likely he married into the family of Nebuchadnezzar through his daughter *Nitocris*, possibly the 'queen' of 5.10. He spent much of his reign in the Arabian city of *Tayma* and so appointed his son Belshazzar as co-regent in Babylon (550-539BC).

Table 1: Relation of Babylonian Kings to Nebuchadnezzar

Nebuchadnezzar (605–562) (mentioned 91 times in OT, most in Jer. 21–52; Dan. 1–5)
Awel-Marduk (562–560): son (2 Kings 25:27; Jer. 52:31)
Nergal-Sharezer (560–556): possible son-in-law; wife unknown (Jer. 39:3, 13)
Labashi-Marduk (556): possible maternal grandson (no biblical reference); murdered as a young boy
Nabonidus (556–539): perhaps son-in-law through daughter Nitocris (no biblical reference)
Belshazzar (550–539): perhaps maternal grandson (Dan. 5, 7–8); also son of, and coregent with, Nabonidus



Prophecy. The Bible is a tale of two cities. *Babylon*, founded by Nimrod, represents rebellion against God. *Jerusalem*, however, is the dwelling place of God (Psalm 76.2) and city of the great King (Matthew 5.35). Daniel 5 foreshadows the great fall of Babylon during the tribulation. One in ten verses in Revelation speak of Babylon which is viewed as a *vile* prostitute (17.5) in contrast to the *virtuous* bride of Christ. In Revelation 17, Babylon is presented as a religious system, the 'mother of harlots', the source of all spiritual prostitution, i.e. false religion. Corrupt religion is always presented under the figure of a woman (Zechariah 5.7, Matthew 13.33). She will be made 'desolate' by the ten-king confederation of the beast, probably at the midpoint of the tribulation when he establishes himself as the sole object of universal worship (17.16-17; 2 Thessalonians 2.4). In Revelation 18, Babylon is presented as a commercial city, representing the idolatrous worship of materialism, the lust of riches and luxury. This may necessitate the literal rebuilding of the city of Babylon, possibly as the capital city of the beast. She will be destroyed by God at the end of the tribulation (18.2, 19-21). The great cry from heaven is still pertinent for today. *Revelation 18.4: Come out of her, my people, That ye be not partakers of her sins, And that ye receive not of her plagues.* God's people are divinely called to break from ordered and organised religion, gathering only to the name of the Lord Jesus. Neither should they be consumed by the materialistic character of this evil age. *The saints are called to a spiritual withdrawal from Vanity Fair.* Daniel, type of the faithful Jewish remnant, survives the judgment of Babylon and emerges triumphant as one of the presidents of the new kingdom (Walvoord).

The Feast of the King [vv.1-4]

v.1: Belshazzar had been made co-regent of Babylon by his father Nabonidus. Though the enemy was camped outside the city, Belshazzar was clearly confident in its fortifications. He 'made a great feast' which was likely the annual celebration of the god 'Bel' (Marduk), the head of the Babylonian pantheon. Belshazzar ('Prince of Bel') had been named in honour of this god and would be expected to lead the celebration. A 'thousand' of his higher government officials ('lords') were invited to the feast, before whom he 'drank wine'. The language suggests he was perched on a platform above the other guests, leading them in drinking toasts to his gods. **v.2:** Whilst Belshazzar was under the influence of wine, he made a foolish decision (cf. Proverbs 20.1; 23.29-33; 31.4). He called for the gold and silver vessels which his *grandfather* (the word 'father' simply means *ancestor*) Nebuchadnezzar had brought from the temple in Jerusalem. The capture of such vessels supposedly demonstrated the supremacy of Bel over the God of the Hebrews. *Now, in an act of calculated, deliberate, defiance of the God of heaven, they were to be desecrated in the worship of an idol* (Allen), cf. v.23. However polluted as a result of being in pagan hands, such vessels were once used in the service of God and were

therefore holy (Joshua 6.19, 24; 1 Kings 7.51). Belshazzar was careless and irreverent about divine things – and we can be the same in terms of our attitude, language, devotion and dress. *These vessels were holy vessels, not to be used for anything but the worship of the one true God. So, Belshazzar and his nobles were engaging in a deliberately sacrilegious act* (Lennox). His ‘wives’ and ‘concubines’ constituted the royal harem and normally lived in separate apartments. They would not normally be seen in public, and thus their display was likely to stir the sensual passions of those present. This was no harmless party, but an ‘excess of riot’ (1 Peter 4.4). **v.3:** Drinking from such vessels whilst praising the gods (which in the pagan world were represented by idols made of different materials, v.4) was a blatant act of pagan mockery and blasphemy. It was a public and insolent challenge to the God of heaven. Is Belshazzar alone in this prostration before the gods of gold and silver? Covetousness is idolatry (Colossians 3.5). An unhealthy obsession with having what is bigger, better and more expensive. Our idols today consist of self, pleasure, sport, education and family.

This feast was undoubtedly in the mind of Peter. *1 Peter 4.3: For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness (acts of impurity), lusts, excess of wine, revellings (partying), banquetings (social drinking), and abominable idolatries.* The believer has abandoned such a former way of life.

The Finger of God [v.5]

v.5: *God is not mocked* (Galatians 6.7). His patient longsuffering has been exhausted. ‘In the same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand’ sent from God Himself (v.24). *Jack Hay: The finger that had once forbidden idolatry by engraving commandments on stones (Exodus 31.18) now brought a message of condemnation to one who had flagrantly defied that prohibition.* The writing was a miracle that the idols of Babylon could never accomplish (Psalm 115.7)! The hand wrote ‘upon the plaister of the wall’ in the most brightly illuminated part of the room ‘opposite the lampstand’ (NET) in order that it might be clearly seen. In the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar’s palace, archaeologists have uncovered a large throne room 56ft wide and 173ft long. In the long wall facing the entrance was a special recess (where the king likely sat) covered in white plaster. God had formerly decreed that his word should be inscribed on the door frames of houses as a preservative not to forget Him (Deuteronomy 6.9). Now he writes on Babylon’s walls!

The Fear of the Sovereign [vv.6-9]

v.6: All of a sudden, the king’s mood transformed. His ‘countenance’ (brightness) was changed, i.e. the colour drained from his face. He became ‘alarmed’, weak and unable to stand and his knees knocked together. Fear had taken hold of his whole body. **v.7:** The king literally ‘screamed’ for his wise men offering royal rewards for any who could interpret the writing. A ‘purple’ robe and ‘chain of gold’ were items reserved for royalty and men of rank (Genesis 41.42) – fitting for one who would be ‘third ruler’ in the kingdom after Nabonidus and Belshazzar. **v.8:** However, none of the wise men could ‘read the writing’. The writing was Aramaic and, though the native language of the court was Akkadian, it was widely used and understood. There are several explanations for the difficulty of the wise men. *First*, Aramaic is a consonantal text. Having no vowels could create different possible interpretations. *Second*, the letters may have been equally spaced (without word divisions) and written vertically rather than horizontally. *Third*, the nouns that are written (which Daniel interpreted as verbs) describe standard, decreasing Babylonian weights. Therefore, it is probable the wise men could *read* the writing but failed to understand (or interpret) its significance. This required Divine illumination!

Aramaic	Noun	Verb
מנא	A “mina” – 60 gold shekels equal 1 mina	“mēnā” To number
תקל	Aramaic spelling of a “shekel” – 1/60 th of a mina	“tēkāl” To weigh
פרסין	Plural form of פרוס Half-minas	
פרס	“pērēs” = half-mina “pārās” = Persia	“pērās” To break apart

The Finding of a Man [vv.10-16]

v.10: The ‘queen’ is possibly to be identified as *Nitocris*, the mother of Belshazzar and daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. She certainly appears separate from the ‘wives’ and ‘concubines’ (vv.2-3) and displayed first-hand knowledge about the affairs of Nebuchadnezzar. The queen mother was often an influential figure in Eastern courts. Her absence from the feast is possibly due to the disgrace of her husband, Nabonidus, now in enemy hands. She was clearly concerned about her son, and possibly recalled the fear of her father in former days (cf. 2.1). **v.11:** In statements drawn from 4.8-9, she directs Belshazzar’s attention to ‘a man’ in his kingdom named Daniel. He was a man in *communion* with the supernatural (‘spirit of the holy gods’) and *commended* for his supernatural ‘light’ (enlightenment), ‘understanding’ (insight) and ‘wisdom’. **v.12:** In addition, he was one who could ‘shew hard sentences’ (solve riddles) and ‘dissolve doubts’ (lit. untie knots). The queen therefore gave the order for Daniel to be called. **v.13:** The separation of Daniel is apparent throughout the book. He was not at the feast and remained altogether disconnected from the idolatry of Babylon. Sadly, the world does not seek the wisdom of God until its own destitution is apparent. Though Daniel is in his eighties, he is still available to respond to the call of God (2 Timothy 4.2). *Wiersbe: To the king’s shame, he knew Daniel*

only by name and reputation, not personally. What a tragedy that the ruler of the mighty city of Babylon should ignore one of the greatest men in history and turn to him only in the last hours of life when it was too late.

The Failure of Belshazzar [vv.17-23]

v.17: Following the example of Abraham (Genesis 14.17-23) and Elisha (2 Kings 5.15-16), Daniel was not willing to receive the 'rewards' of Belshazzar. He did not want his interpretation or words to appear biased by an expectation of reward. The true man of God does not seek the praise, compensation or reward of this world (Acts 20.33). But still, Daniel would read the writing. He was not resentful or bitter, but ever ready in the service of his God. **v.18:** Before interpretation, he has a few other things to say. *MacArthur: Like all good preachers, he can't give his message 'till he gets his introduction out of the way!* Unlike his counsel to Nebuchadnezzar (4.27), Daniel does not offer the same hope to Belshazzar. His days are numbered. Before passing on such a severe message of divine judgment, he first explains why (Revelation 20.12). Surprisingly, Daniel gives Belshazzar a history lesson connected with his grandfather (vv.18-21). **Why? v.22:** He has sinned against knowledge! Belshazzar 'knew' very well the way in which God had dealt with his family. He could not claim ignorance. It is serious to sin through ignorance (Leviticus 4.2); it is more serious still to sin presumptuously (Numbers 15.30; cf. Hebrew 6.4-6). We must not forget, but rather learn from, the lessons of history (1 Corinthians 10.6-11). **v.23:** Instead of *humbling* himself before God, he did the opposite! He *exalted* himself against God in a supreme act of wilful blasphemy and idolatrous worship. Daniel quotes from the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 4.28), Psalms (115.5-7) and Prophets (Isaiah 44.9) to show the utter futility of such idolatry. Whilst Belshazzar praised his lifeless idols, he failed to recognise the very breath of his life was in the hand of the living God (Acts 17.28). This same God even providentially controls his every circumstance. In all this he had not 'glorified God', i.e. rendered the honour that is rightfully due to Him, cf. 1 Corinthians 6.20; 10.31.

The Features of the Writing [vv.24-28]

v.24: *Jim Allen: Mercy can no longer stay the sentence – the handwriting is on the wall.* God had sent Belshazzar a final message. It was the Divine verdict on his life. **v.25:** As noted above (see v.8) the words describe standard, decreasing Babylonian weights which Daniel interprets as verbs rather than nouns. The words would no doubt have caused the assembled company to think of values. *Lennox: Is the almighty God interested in values? Does the spiritual realm have a scale of value? God is the source of ultimate values. What the world values and God values are very different things. The world values pleasure, success, money. God values righteousness, holiness and humility.* The word 'upharsin' (plural) includes the letter 'u' which is a simple conjunction (and) in Aramaic. Daniel uses the singular form of the word in v.28. **v.26:** MENE, used twice to emphasise certainty (cf. Genesis 41.32), means 'numbered'. The kingdom's specific allocation of days was now complete. Iniquity had reached full measure (Genesis 15.16). **v.27:** TEKEL, he had been 'weighed' in the righteous balances (scales) of divine justice and found *deficient*. He was too light in his moral *value* and spiritual *virtue*. God has assessed the moral and spiritual integrity of Belshazzar, as he does with every individual (Leviticus 19.36; Job 31.6; 1 Samuel 2.3). No-one can reach the divine standard and must therefore seek mercy from God. Mankind's evaluation of Christ was nothing (Luke 23.11; Acts 4.11), but God hath highly exalted Him! **v.28:** PERES, could have a double-meaning as changing the vowels to 'a' instead of 'e' gives the Aramaic word for 'Persian', hinting at the enemy outside the city gates. But Daniel uses the vowel 'e' and interprets the word as 'divided', but not into two equal parts – as if half to the Persians and half to the Medes. Rather the thought is of *division* into 'pieces', to be 'shattered'. The practical challenge is clear – what is the weight of our spiritual conduct? Are we morally and/or spiritually deficient? How will we fare at the Divine weigh-in of the judgment seat? To summarise, Belshazzar fell short through *immorality* (v.1), *irreverence* (vv.2-3), *idolatry* (v.4), and all this without *ignorance* (v.22). The root of the matter was **pride** and not rendering to God the **glory** that is rightly His (v.23).

The Fulfilment of the Vision [vv.29-31]

v.29: The promised gifts of the king are given to Daniel, and received, now they cannot be said to influence his interpretation. To reject them now would bring Daniel under grave suspicion of treason especially given his statement about the Medes and Persians! Harold Paisley notes the parallel: *The woman of Jericho with her scarlet line was saved from the overthrow of the city of the curse. The house with the scarlet mark of blood was sheltered from the judgment that fell upon Egypt. Now, the servant in the scarlet garment was spared in the overthrow of Babylon.* **v.30:** That very night the word of God was fulfilled as the Persians diverted the flow of the Euphrates allowing them to walk into the city on the undefended riverbed. God had already warned of the same 150 years previous (Isaiah 45.1-2; Jeremiah 50.38)! The brass river gates were forced, though some historical sources suggest they had been opened due to bribery and/or betrayal. **v.31:** And so, Darius the Median 'took control' of the kingdom at 62 years of age (see Daniel 6 for a discussion of his identification). This empire was to endure for over two hundred years, from the fall of Babylon (539 BC) until the arrival on the world scene of Alexander the Great (332 BC).