

Lesson 12

Last week, we started Chapter 5, which as we said is focused on one of the most remarkable days in human history - the day that Persia defeated Babylon.

And in the opening verses of Chapter 5 we met Belshazzar, who along with his father Nabonidus reigned as co-regents over Babylon. Nabonidus at this time was fleeing a defeat by Persia, and Babylon was the only thing left for Persia to conquer.

And what was Belshazzar doing while Persia was camped outside the wall? He was having a drunken feast with his friends. The Bible tells us that as do the ancient Greek historians.

And as bad as it was for the king to be having a drunken feast, Belshazzar made the situation worse for himself by what he was using to hold the wine at the drunken feast. He was using the temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem before he destroyed the city and the temple.

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.

Why were the Jewish temple vessels used?

First, I don't think it was an accident that the king used these particular vessels for his wine. Later in verse 23, Daniel will tell the king that he had lifted up himself against the Lord of heaven. It seems clear that Belshazzar had made a deliberate decision to challenge and blaspheme the God of Israel this way.

But why? Why had the king gone out of his way to challenge God?

Perhaps Belshazzar wanted to show that he was greater even than Nebuchadnezzar himself. In effect, Belshazzar may have been saying to God, "You may have humbled Nebuchadnezzar, but you will never humble me!"

Another possibility is that Belshazzar may have already known about the prophecies of his defeat. In

Chapter 8, we will see that Daniel had already prophesied in the third year of Belshazzar's reign about Babylon's fall to the Persians.

Also, Isaiah had mentioned Cyrus, the Persian king who conquered Babylon, by name 150 years before Cyrus was born (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1). That sort of prophecy would get anyone's attention, and Daniel or someone else may have shown it to the king. If so, Belshazzar may have been challenging those prophecies from God by using the temple vessels during his drunken feast.

Whatever the reason, this challenge to God by Belshazzar will work out the same way such challenges always work out. Men may raise their fist to God and challenge his word (as they still do today), but God's word always prevails. God always has the last word, and such challenges always fail.

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.

Chapter 5 opens a window for us to view one of the most remarkable and most important events in history - the very day that the Persians conquered ancient Babylon. And verses 5-6 are without doubt the most remarkable thing that happened on that very remarkable day. Here is how one commentary describes it:

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.

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." It means that his bright looks, his cheerfulness, and his hilarity were very suddenly changed. The text literally says that "the joints of his loins were loosened," which may suggest various other symptoms of extreme panic that we won't go into!

Here is how one older commentary described the situation:

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!

If, as we suggested, the king has used the temple vessels from Jerusalem to shake his fist at God, he was now getting God's response.

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 palaces was a huge chamber with three entrances that Koldewey identified as the throne room. Koldewey described it this way:

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? How would that unknown Jew writing four centuries later have known the color of the walls in Belshazzar's throne room? Daniel knew the color of the walls because Daniel was there to see those walls!

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 in verse 7. Or perhaps the king shouted just because he was afraid.

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

The wise men could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Why not? 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.)

Let's look at that question more closely.

First, 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 will later suggest very strongly that the words were in fact written in Aramaic because those verses appear to 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, as we will see, 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 written 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 so, then that 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, this is certainly 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.

So, then, back to our earlier question: 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 the letters 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.

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. Others suggest that the writing vanished after the king saw it, but later in verse 16 the king will ask Daniel to read it, which suggests that it was still there to be read.

These three words can also be translated to mean three different measures of weights. This ambiguity provides another theory why the king's advisors were unable to tell the king to what the words referred. For example, does the word "pound" refer to a weight or to a monetary value? You need to know the context.

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 writing words inspired by God, and so we see a unity throughout the Bible, from the first book to the last book. 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.

How do we see that in Daniel 5? Because the Babylonian Empire was coming to an end this very night - and what was happening? There was confusion about language. And how did Babylon begin? With a confusion of language in Genesis 11:1-9. God is taking them out in Daniel 5 the way they came in!

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 Nebuchadnezzar 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.

"O king, live for ever!" It was the usual greeting for a king, but in this case "forever" was just a few hours!

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 (who was possibly the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar) or both the widow of Nebuchadnezzar and the wife of Nabonidus (if Nabonidus married the widow of Nebuchadnezzar as some suggest). She was most likely the mother of Belshazzar. If she was the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar, then 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. That would be easy to explain if Nebuchadnezzar was her father. Notice that even the queen herself refers to Nebuchadnezzar as the father of Belshazzar in verse 11, which suggests she had a very strong link to Nebuchadnezzar.

Whoever this queen was, she was not initially at the drunken feast. That suggests that she may have been the real power here since someone was presumably worrying about the Persians who were camped just outside while everyone else was drinking themselves into a stupor!

Notice that the queen twice refers to Daniel by his personal Hebrew name, which suggests that 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 Daniel, it could be that the king did not recognize the now much older Daniel, or it could be that the king was too drunk to remember anyone.

Also, Nebuchadnezzar had died over 20 years ago, and Daniel apparently did not now enjoy the same exalted position he had under Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel had likely retired (or perhaps had been forcibly retired) from public life when Nebuchadnezzar died, at which time Daniel would have been in his sixties. He was now in his eighties.

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 had told him about the items that her father Nebuchadnezzar had brought back from Jerusalem many years earlier.

Notice in verse 10 that the queen enters 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 Nabonidus? 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 that is what happened each time.

But here, of course, we have another perhaps even more likely possibility for why Daniel was not called earlier - 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, which tells us that even Belshazzar himself referred to Nebuchadnezzar as his father.

It was apparently very important to both Nabonidus and Belshazzar that they legitimize their rule at every opportunity by linking themselves to Nebuchadnezzar. Also, by mentioning Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar gives 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! Let's see how easy Daniel it to intimidate!

Why does Belshazzar use the name "Daniel" rather than the Babylonian name "Belteshazzar" in addressing the prophet? Possibly 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.

It seems that Daniel was not easy to intimidate! In fact, Daniel, the Jewish exile, tells Belshazzar that his "father" Nebuchadnezzar was a donkey! Or at least he ran with them!

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. But 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! Daniel was being offered the position of third ruler for just a few hours! For a modern day analogy, it would be like getting a lifetime warranty from Sears!

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 much less 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 former 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....

Nebuchadnezzar had been filled with pride and had 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.

But 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 a 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. 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.

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!

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 (one being repeated so that there were 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.

Let's look at the message word by word.

The first and second word was "MENE." It 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 Belshazzar 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 was "TEKEL." That word means "weighed," and Daniel explained that Belshazzar had been weighed and found wanting.

Belshazzar 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 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.

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.

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 followed by a separate 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 just a casual glance at the text of Daniel is enough to show that he did not.

While we are talking about the liberal views of the text, let's look at another example.

We mentioned earlier that these three words can also be translated to mean three different measures of weights. Liberals have latched onto this possible meaning and have suggested that instead of being written by God, the words were really written by a waiter at the feast who was just trying to remember how much food to serve. (This sort of crazy theory would be funny if it were not so sad. Maybe some day those liberals will also see the writing on the wall!)

Other commentators have also stressed the connection of these words with measures of weight - even though Daniel gives an interpretation in verses 26-28 that does not deal with measures of weight. We know what the words meant because Daniel tells us, and he did not say that they meant different measurements of weight. Nevertheless, some commentators have created elaborate theories based on these words meaning measures of weight.

For example, some argue that mene refers to mena, which equalled 50 shekels, and that upharsin (half a mena) equalled 25 shekels. They also say that tekem refers to shekel. Thus, the four words would then have stood for: mena, 50 shekels; mena, 50 shekels; tekem, 1 shekel; upharsin, 25 shekels. If you add that up you get 126 shekels. We are also told that a shekel can be divided up into 20 gerahs (Ezekiel 45:12). That would mean that the 126 shekels of Daniel 5:25 is equivalent to 2520 gerahs.

Where have we seen 2520 before? That was the number of years that the Jehovah's Witnesses counted from their (incorrect) date for the destruction of the temple to arrive at 1914 as the year the kingdom was established! So does this prophecy relate to something 2520 years away? No, both the text and history tell us that the prophecy was fulfilled within hours of when it was given. Also, Daniel gave us the meaning of the terms in verses 26-28, and he did not interpret them to mean various numbers of shekels.

Yes, numbers are used figuratively in the Bible. We will see some used that way in later chapters of this book. But when numbers are used figuratively in the Bible - we are given the numbers! The numbers are in the text! Here there are no numbers - not in the words on the wall, and not in the interpretation of the words on the wall. Once we start making up numbers, or assigning numeric codes to non-numeric words in the Bible, there is no end to what we could come up with. The first step to determining what a number in the Bible means is to actually have a number in the Bible - and we don't get past that first step here.

This is a good lesson for us as we approach some of the more difficult chapters in this book. Context is crucial, and we need to pay very close attention to what the text itself tells us about the visions that will be described.

You can "prove" just about anything with letters and numbers if you are willing to disregard context and common sense. You may have seen the books that purport to find secret codes embedded in the letters of the Bible when they are shifted and counted in certain ways.

The number 2520 coming up twice must mean something, right? Wrong. How old was William Shakespeare in 1611 when the King James Version was published? He was 46. What is the 46th word in Psalm 46? "Shake." What is the 46th word counting backward from the end of Psalm 46 (ignoring the word "Selah" at the end)? "Spear." Therefore William Shakespeare wrote Psalm 46. Right? Wrong! If you think that is about the silliest theory you have ever heard about the Bible, then you should read more Daniel commentaries!

One final point about these three words: 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." So 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."

#daniel