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MINISTRIES

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The Exiled Prophet, Part 6: Writing on the Wall (Daniel 5)

Welcome back to our study on the book of Daniel. In our last teaching, we covered Daniel chapter 4, where king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a great tree that was cut down. Daniel interpreted the dream, saying that the tree was the king, and that God was going to humble him. The dream came true, and Nebuchadnezzar was driven out of his kingdom, and became like an animal. However, the king then acknowledged and glorified God, and had both his sanity and his kingdom restored to him.

In this teaching, we’re going to cover Daniel chapter 5. In chapter 5, another Babylonian king, Belshazzar, throws a huge party. During the festivities, a hand appears in his palace and writes four words on the palace wall. Daniel is called in to interpret the words, and he declares that Belshazzar is about to lose his kingdom to the Medes and the Persians. Daniel’s prophecy then comes true that very evening.

Scholars have identified what’s called a ‘chiastic structure’ in the stories of Daniel chapters two through seven. In a chiastic structure, the themes that appear in the first part of the story also appear in the last part, the themes in the second part of the story will also be in the second-to-last part, and so on until you reach the themes in the center. So, in Daniel, there are similarities between chapters two and seven, and also between chapters three and six, and also between chapters four and five. As we read through chapter 5, some of the similarities with chapter 4 will become evident.

Here is how chapter 5 begins:

Daniel 5:1-4

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

In verse 1, we are introduced to King Belshazzar. So, what happened to King Nebuchadnezzar? Babylonian records indicate that Nebuchadnezzar had died about twenty-two years before the events described in this chapter. After his death, there was significant political turmoil, and rulership over Babylon passed through the hands of three of Nebuchadnezzar's relatives. Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law, Nabonidus, ended up taking control. Nabonidus spent a lot of time away from the city of Babylon, and he made his son Belshazzar a co-regent—a sort of secondary king—so that Belshazzar could manage the city while he was away (Ted Noel, *A Primer on the Book of Daniel*, [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009], p. 47).

The mention of Belshazzar in the book of Daniel is actually a remarkable piece of history. For a long time, it was thought that Belshazzar was a fictional character, because ancient historians, like Herodotus (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.77) and Josephus (Josephus, *Antiquities* 10.11.2), had never heard of him. It wasn't until the nineteenth century, when archaeologists found artifacts that had Belshazzar's name on them, that historians acknowledged that Belshazzar was indeed a real person (James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950], p. 313). The fact that Belshazzar was quickly forgotten by history, and was only recently rediscovered, is still more evidence that the author of Daniel lived in sixth-century Babylon, and was not an Israeli fiction writer from centuries later (John F. Walvoord, *Daniel*, edited by Charles H. Dyer & Philip E. Rawley [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2012], p. 189; Ted Noel, *A Primer on the Book of Daniel*, [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009], pp. 49-50).

Why did Belshazzar make this great feast? History indicates that there was a Babylonian festival happening at this time (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.191; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.5.15 & 7.5.25). So, it was not unusual that the king hosted this big party. What was unusual was that he desecrated the temple vessels.

Remember the chiasmic structure that we mentioned earlier? How chapters 4 and 5 have similar themes? Well, one of those similarities is in the behavior of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. In chapter 4, we read about an arrogant king, Nebuchadnezzar, exalting himself above God. Here, in chapter 5, we have a similar theme, with Belshazzar exalting himself by defiling the temple items. However, this king's self-exaltation is even more foolish than Nebuchadnezzar's. Belshazzar did not have the same claim to fame as Nebuchadnezzar, who had worked very hard to achieve the success and glory that his kingdom attained. That doesn't justify Nebuchadnezzar's pride, but it is at least understandable. Belshazzar, on the other hand, hadn't done anything to earn the glory of his kingdom; he got to be king just because he was his father's eldest son. Furthermore, he wasn't really a full king; Nabonidus was still technically in charge. So, it was incredibly pretentious for Belshazzar to be gloating over the spoils that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from God's temple (Daniel 1:2), especially since he knew that God had humbled Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 5:18-23). So, while chapters 4 and 5 both feature an arrogant king, this king in chapter 5 indulges in some wine, and takes things a step further than Nebuchadnezzar ever did. However, God found a way to very quickly make this king sober:

Daniel 5:5-6

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.

“His color changed” is a phrase that only appears in the book of Daniel. It seems to mean that the color drained from his face, but it could just mean that he appeared disturbed or unhappy (see Daniel 7:28).

The phrase “his limbs gave way” is rendered differently in other translations; the King James version says that “the joints of his loins were loosed,” which sounds like a euphemism for soiling himself. Alternatively, it might simply mean that he lost strength in his legs. Either way, it’s hard to blame the king for his reaction. Watching a disembodied hand write on the wall of your house would be terrifying.

Daniel 5:7

The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, “Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

Here we have another interesting piece of history. Why did Belshazzar offer the position of “third ruler in the kingdom” to the one who interpreted the writing? The usual reward that kings offer is second highest in the kingdom, not third (cf. Genesis 41:40; Esther 5:3; Mark 6:23). However, we know from the Babylonian records that Belshazzar was himself the second-highest official in the kingdom (*Nabonidus Cylinder from Ur*, Column 3; *Verse Account of Nabonidus*, Column 2). So, third place was the best he could offer to somebody else. In spite of his offer, nobody could interpret the writing for him:

Daniel 5:8-9

Then all the king’s wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

It’s not strange that the wise men were unable to interpret the writing—at this point in the book of Daniel, it would be surprising to find a Chaldean wise man who could interpret *anything*—but it is strange that they could not *read* it. Daniel reveals later that the words were written in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language that the Babylonians used for international communications (E. Kautzsch and Charles R. Brown, “The Aramaic Language”, *Hebraica* Vol. 1, No. 2 (October 1884), p. 99). So, the wise men—and, for that matter, the king himself—should have been able to *read* these Aramaic words, even if they didn’t understand what they meant. So, then, why could they not read it?

Numerous theories have been proposed to explain the illiteracy of the wise men. For example, the Talmud suggests that the words were written in a kind of Aramaic script that the wise men were not familiar with (*Sanhedrin* 22a:1). Others have proposed that the letters were written without vowel markings, so the wise men could not figure out how they should be pronounced (John Goldingay, *Daniel and the Twelve Prophets for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), p. 36), or that they were written in a code or some unusual arrangement. Another possibility is that we are simply reading the text too literally. The phrase, “they could not read the writing or make known...the interpretation,” could simply mean that they didn’t understand what the words were trying to say, not that they couldn’t read them at all. In verse 15, Belshazzar says that the wise men could not interpret the writing, but not that they could not read it, so that lends some credence to this explanation. In any event, the wise men could not solve this riddle, but the queen knew someone who could: Daniel.

Daniel 5:10-12

The queen, because of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting hall, and the queen declared, “O king, live forever! Let not your thoughts alarm you or your color change. There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King

Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation.”

The Scriptures don't tell us who this queen was, but there are a few pieces of evidence that point toward a particular person. One would assume her to be Belshazzar's wife, but if that were the case, why is she familiar with Daniel, while Belshazzar seems not to be? Another possibility is that she is Nabonidus's wife. Nabonidus, as we mentioned, was the actual king at this time, and since he was Belshazzar's father, this queen could have been Belshazzar's mother. This would also have made her Nebuchadnezzar's daughter. This would explain why the queen knew so much about Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel: she would have heard her father's stories about Daniel, and almost certainly lived through the time when Nebuchadnezzar went mad—the story that we read in Daniel chapter 4. Whoever this queen was, she was the only one who recommended Daniel to the king, which indicates something very interesting: Daniel is not the main wise man in Babylon at this time.

Despite his past successful dream interpretations, and all of Nebuchadnezzar's promises about making him head of the king's court (Daniel 2:48-49), he still seems to have been relegated to a back-up position—Belshazzar still consults all of the Chaldean wise men first. In fact, it seems like Belshazzar either doesn't know who Daniel is or doesn't think that Daniel is worth consulting. Daniel's obscurity at this point speaks to just how set the Babylonians were in their ways. Even though Daniel could show them, with wisdom and fulfilled prophecies, that he was speaking on behalf of the real God, they still preferred to rely on their magicians, enchanters, and astrologers, to serve their idols, and to live their Babylonian lifestyle. The prophet Jeremiah declared that this pride and rejection of God would lead to Babylon's destruction:

Jeremiah 50:29-31

Summon archers against Babylon, all those who bend the bow. Encamp around her; let no one escape. Repay her according to her deeds; do to her according to all that she has done. For she has proudly defied the LORD [YHWH], the Holy One of Israel. Therefore her young men shall fall in her squares, and all her soldiers shall be destroyed on that day, declares the LORD [YHWH]. Behold, I am against you, O proud one, declares the LORD [YHWH] God of hosts, for your day has come, the time when I will punish you.

Jeremiah 50:35-38

A sword against the Chaldeans, declares the LORD [YHWH], and against the inhabitants of Babylon, and against her officials and her wise men! A sword against the diviners, that they may become fools! A sword against her warriors, that they may be destroyed! A sword against her horses and against her chariots, and against all the foreign troops in her midst, that they may become women! A sword against all her treasures, that they may be plundered! A drought against her waters, that they may be dried up! For it is a land of images, and they are mad over idols.

Daniel is about to deliver the same message as Jeremiah. In fact, as we will see, these prophecies would be fulfilled on that very night. Let's continue:

Daniel 5:13-16

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, “You are that

Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

Here, we see Daniel in a familiar situation: the Babylonian wise men are incapable of solving a riddle, so Daniel is called in and promised great rewards if he can succeed. Daniel has never been interested in fame or power (Daniel 2:27-30), but by this time, he also knows how hollow the offers of a king can be. This may be why he answers Belshazzar so curtly:

Daniel 5:17

Then Daniel answered and said before the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation.

Daniel lets it be known that he is just interested in doing his job. He doesn't care about Belshazzar's empty promises. He continues:

Daniel 5:18-21

O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will.

Daniel begins his interpretation by referring to the great king Nebuchadnezzar, pointing out that while Nebuchadnezzar had amazing accomplishments and incredible power, he came to realize that God was the one in charge, and therefore God should be honored. However, Belshazzar has walked a different path, as Daniel points out:

Daniel 5:22-23

And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored.

Belshazzar saw fit to dishonor the God who had humbled the greatest king in Babylon's history. As Jeremiah said, Babylon was facing punishment because it was “a land of images, and they are mad over idols.” (Jeremiah 50:38) However, Jeremiah also said that God would take vengeance upon Babylon “for his temple”:

Jeremiah 51:11

The LORD [YHWH] has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD [YHWH], the vengeance for his temple.

For Belshazzar to defile the temple vessels on this night is rather ironic; it's as though the king was reminding God of the vengeance that God had promised. Whether Belshazzar specifically intended to do that or not, Daniel gives him the bad news: he has gotten God's attention, but he's going to wish that he hadn't.

Daniel 5:24-28

Then from his presence the light appeared, and this writing was inscribed. And this is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

Let's take a closer look at the words that were written on the wall. The first is *mene* (pronounced "me-NAY"). This word means to count or assign. It is used in verse 26:

"...God has **numbered** [mene] the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end"

There are a few interesting things about this verse. First, the words, "the days of" are not in the Aramaic text. They are added because it is thought that they are implied. They are thought to be implied because of the phrase "brought it to an end." This phrase comes from the Aramaic word *shalem*. The word *shalem* can mean to bring something to an end, but more often, it means to *repay*, in the sense of giving recompense for damages (see Exodus 21:35-36; Leviticus 6:4-5; Judges 1:6-7; Jeremiah 16:18). In fact, this word *shalem* is used to mean exactly that in the book of Jeremiah; the prophet says that Babylon will be repaid for their sins, and for destroying Jerusalem:

Jeremiah 25:12-14

Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD [YHWH], making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves even of them, and I will **recompense** [*shalem*] them according to their deeds and the work of their hands.

Jeremiah 51:24

I will **repay** [*shalem*] Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the evil that they have done in Zion, declares the LORD [YHWH].

So, instead of saying that the kingdom's *days* have been counted, another way to read Daniel 5:26 is to say that the kingdom's *debt* has been counted, and it must be paid back. The term *Mene* would then be indicating that Babylon's bill is due, so to speak.

The next word on the wall is *tekel* (pronounced "te-KAYL"). This word is related to the Hebrew word *shekel*, which is a unit of weight, and is usually used to determine the value of money, or precious

metals. *Tekel* means “to weigh,” to measure how heavy something is. This is how the word *tekel* is used in verse 27:

“...you have been **weighed** [*tekel*] in the balances and found wanting.”

When payments were being made, the money—the silver or gold—was weighed in a balance in order to determine that it was the correct amount—the correct weight (see Jeremiah 32:9-10). This weighing was done to ensure that the person paying the silver was not cheating—that he was not giving shekels that were lacking in silver; that his money was the correct weight. This idea of weighing money is sometimes metaphorically used to mean judging a person—seeing if he measures up, if he is what he claims to be:

Job 31:6

Let me be weighed [*sheqel*] in a just balance, and let God know my integrity!

Daniel says that Belshazzar was weighed, and was found wanting (or lacking)—that he was judged to be insufficient. We know, however, from the Scriptures that those who follow God will not be found wanting:

Psalms 23:1

The LORD [YHWH] is my shepherd; I shall not **want**.

Proverbs 13:25

The righteous has enough to satisfy his appetite, but the belly of the wicked suffers **want**.

So, then, here is the message so far: *Mene*, an account has been taken; Babylon owes a debt because of their destruction of Jerusalem, and they have to pay it. *Tekel*, Belshazzar has been weighed, and he is lacking; he is not able to pay this debt. So, then, what is going to happen? That’s where the word *parsin* comes in. *Parsin* (pronounced “par-SEEN”) is the plural of the word *peres* (“pe-RACE”), which means to divide or separate. It is used in the sense of sharing something, as we see in Isaiah:

Isaiah 58:7

Is it not to **share** [*peres*] your bread with the hungry...

It is also related to a word (*parsah*) which means a split hoof. So, the idea behind *peres* is that something is being divided up and shared, like a cow’s hoof is divided and shared among two toes. In the same way, the kingdom of Babylon is going to be divided and shared among two groups. This is what it says in verse 28:

“*Peres*, your kingdom is **divided** [*peres*] and given to the Medes and Persians.”

As one more note, there is also a play on words happening here: *Peres* sounds a lot like *Paras*, which is the word used here for Persia.

So, to paraphrase the message on the wall: *Mene*, Babylon owes a debt; *Tekel*, Belshazzar is unable to pay that debt; and so, *Peres*, his kingdom will be divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

That Babylon would be conquered by the Medes and Persians had been prophesied for some time; the prophet Isaiah declared:

Isaiah 13:17-19

Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.

Later, Jeremiah said the same thing:

Jeremiah 51:11

The LORD [YHWH] has stirred up the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD [YHWH], the vengeance for his temple.

Jeremiah 51:28-29

Prepare the nations for war against her, the kings of the Medes, with their governors and deputies, and every land under their dominion. The land trembles and writhes in pain, for the LORD's [YHWH's] purposes against Babylon stand, to make the land of Babylon a desolation, without inhabitant.

At the very moment that Daniel was interpreting this writing on the wall, the armies of the Medes and Persians were at the gates of Babylon (Herodotus, *Histories* 1:190–191; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.5.1-30). This may be why Daniel did not pray for an interpretation like he did for Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2; Daniel was familiar with the prophecies of Jeremiah (see Daniel 9:2), so when he saw the army surrounding the city, and Belshazzar defiling the temple implements, he knew exactly what God was planning to do. And, it seems that Belshazzar was convinced that Daniel knew what he was talking about:

Daniel 5:29

Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.

So, Belshazzar does keep his word and honors Daniel for his interpretation. As it turns out, this is the last honor that Belshazzar will be able to provide anyone.

Daniel 5:30-31

That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

So, Belshazzar's reign came to a sudden end. The Medes and Persians conquered Babylon, just as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel had foretold. When we discuss chapter 6, we'll talk more about the history of the Medes and Persians, as well as this new king, Darius. For now, though, let's look at what lessons we can take away from this chapter.

Now is the Day of Salvation

What can we learn from this story in Daniel chapter 5? As we mentioned before, chapter 5 mirrors chapter 4 in many ways. Chapter 4 showed us that God is in charge of everything; that no king, no matter how accomplished or powerful, can overcome God's power. In that chapter, God taught the arrogant king a lesson by imposing madness on him for a long time until the king acknowledged and thanked God. In this chapter, however, the arrogant king is not given any time; the same night that judgment was declared in the writing on the wall, the king died. We know that God is longsuffering, and not willing that any should perish, but like Belshazzar, we do not have any guarantee of how long our life will last. So, then, why should we wait to repent and turn to God? Why waste another day? As Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

...we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Romans 13:11-12

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

(see also: Psalm 2:10-12; Matthew 5:25-26)

The book of Daniel so far has shown us that God is in charge of everything; that he is greater than any king or power in the world. It has also shown that God is greater than us, and that he has a plan for us—in fact, he has a plan for the entire world. Not only that, but he will be with us even when we face seemingly impossible challenges that arise because we are following God. So, then, why should we hesitate to obey him, and follow his plan for our lives?

In the next teaching in this series, we will examine chapter 6 of the book of Daniel. We hope to see you there.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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1) FB banner text (Short sentence or two)

The exiled prophet, Daniel, interprets the writing on the wall for a doomed king in Daniel 5.

2) A short summary of the teaching for the Vimeo description

Continuing our Bible study, we look at Daniel 5, where the exiled prophet reads the writing on the wall. Once again Daniel does what others cannot, and it isn't good news for King Belshazzar.

3) Include keywords, longer description, and some key scripture verses)

Bible Study, The Exiled Prophet, Writing on the Wall, Daniel interprets, handwriting on the wall, disembodied hand, the fall of Babylon, Darius, Daniel, desecrating the temple, God's revenge, Daniel 5:1-4, Daniel 5:5-7, Daniel 5:8-9, Daniel 5:10-12, Daniel 5:13-17, Daniel 5:18-31