

Bible Stories

DANIEL – WRITING ON THE WALL

Daniel 5:26-28

June 10, 2023

Our story today only covers the last night of king Belshazzar's life, so all we know of him is what extra-biblical history and archaeology tells us.

After Nebuchadnezzar's death there were 4 more Babylonian kings, the last of which was Nabonidus. Belshazzar was Nabonidus' son.

For unknown reasons, Nabonidus lived the last few years of his life in Tema, a large oasis located in northwestern Saudi Arabia. It has been suggested that this self-imposed exile was due to the ongoing disagreement he had with the Babylonian clergy and powerful elite over his religious reforms.

While Nabonidus continued to be recognized as king, Belshazzar acted as co-regent in Babylonia. Belshazzar was a capable soldier, but a poor politician. As a result, he was not a popular leader. The people didn't like him. The priesthood didn't like him. The military didn't like him.

October 539 BC – Cyrus had been king of Medo-Persian for 11 years and now he turned his attention to Babylonia and her capital city, Babylon. His army, led by general Gobryas, waited.....

No doubt, Belshazzar knew Cyrus' army was there and itching for a fight, but our story begins, not with preparations for war, but with the announcement that Belshazzar decided to give a great banquet for 1000 of his nobles and that *"he drank with them."*

I'm guessing that this was designed to be an outward show of confidence and mockery, *"I'm not worried in the slightest by Gobryas and his army. My walls are impregnable and my army is strong, so let us eat, drink and be merry!"*

Drunk on wine and false confidence, Belshazzar ordered that the gold and silver goblets Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem be brought into the party so that his nobles, wives and concubines might drink from them.

As they drank, they praised their gods – gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone ----

Suddenly, there near the lampstand! A bloodless hand appeared and began to write on the wall.

As the king watched, his face turned pale, his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

In abject terror, Belshazzar called for all the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought before him:

"Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

None of Belshazzar's wise men could read the writing or tell him what it meant. They were completely baffled. Meanwhile, Belshazzar grew more terrified.

Hearing the commotion from the banquet hall, the queen mother went to investigate.

"O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your ancestor – king Nebuchadnezzar – he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

Daniel was brought before the king:

"Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. The wise men and enchanters were brought before me, but they could not explain the writing. I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Daniel told Belshazzar that he could keep his gifts, but that he would be happy to read the writing and tell him what it meant:

"O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes. But you, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. Therefore, he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. This is the inscription: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPARSIN and this is what these words mean:

Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

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

Uparsin: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

True to his promise, Belshazzar clothed Daniel in purple, put a gold chain around his neck and proclaimed that he was the 3rd highest ruler in the kingdom

Both the Babylonian Chronicles and the Cyrus Cylinder describe Babylon as being taken *"without battle"* and our story concludes with these words:

That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede (possibly another title for general Gobryas) received the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.

What do we do with this story?

Daniel, himself reveals to us all we need to know about this story. Even though Belshazzar knew the story of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion and was familiar with Nebuchadnezzar's decree acknowledging the sovereignty of the Most High God, he chose pride instead of humility and set himself firmly against the God of heaven.

In the end he lost everything.