

The Fall of Babel-On

Daniel 5 and A New Tower of Babel

ESV Daniel 5:1 King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ They drank wine and **praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone**.

⁵ 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**.

⁶ Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together.

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."

⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation.

⁹ **Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed**, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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,

¹² because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation."

¹³ **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.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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."

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.

¹⁸ O king, the Most High God gave **Nebuchadnezzar** your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.

²² And you **his son, Belshazzar**, have not humbled your heart, **though you knew all this**,

²³ 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.

²⁴ "Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed.

²⁵ And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.

²⁶ This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end;

²⁷ TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting;

²⁸ PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

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.

³⁰ That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed.

³¹ And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.

(Daniel 5:1-31)

Origins of the Evil City

Today I want to tell you about a great fall. For some background information, I need to look at this idea of a fall

and the origin of the place that is going to fall here in Daniel 5: Babylon.

In his [discussions of the fall of man](#), Dr. Michael Heiser has an interesting take which I believe can supplement the one that most of us normally think about. Thanks especially to [Augustine](#) and his battles with Pelagius, we are quite familiar with [the first](#) and therefore greatest Fall which takes place in the Garden of Eden as Adam abdicates his role as prophet, priest, and king and plunges the world into sin and death.

From this, we quickly learn that [sin spread](#) to Cain and that Cain, being driven to the land of Nod (“Wandering”) for murdering his brother quickly built [a city](#) and named it after his son ([Gen 4:17](#)). This city soon became a catalyst to both civilization and moral pollution. Some stayed and created the arts and music (Jubal). Some stayed and became polygamists and murderers (Lamech). Some fled and began to dwell in tents (Jabal).

If you were a Jew living in the Second Temple period and reading the popular literature of the day, you would have heard about [a second “fall”](#) much more often than the first. This fall did not happen because of the initial sin, but because of a [multiplying](#) of it in those days of the children of

Cain and Seth. Its **background** is briefly discussed in **Genesis 6:1-4**, but it takes nearly four chapters to unfold that terrible event of the Flood which was the result.

1 Enoch explains more about what Genesis 6:1-4 has in mind behind the scenes. It tells us that **the Watchers**, whom we saw in Daniel 4, “**took wives for themselves ... and they began to enter them and to be defiled in them. And they taught them sorceries and enchantments and root-cutting and explained the plants to them**” (1En 7:1). “**Azael** [the figure behind the Leviticus 16 scapegoat ritual] taught the people to make **swords and armor and shields and breastplates, lessons of angels ... and arm bands and decorations and also eye-painting of beautiful eyes ...** And there was much ungodliness, and they committed sexual immorality, and they were led astray, and they were ruined in all their ways. **Semiaza** taught **enchantments** and root-cutting, **Armaros** incantations, **Barakiel** astronomy, **Chochiel** astrology, **Sathiel** star-gazing, and **Seriel** the course of the moon” (1En 8:1-3). One named **Gader’el** was said to have taught men **the art of war** (1En 69:7). Another named **Kasadya** taught women how to “**smash the embryo in the womb so that it may be crushed**” (69:12).

It adds, “And the women became pregnant and bore great giants ... who devoured the labors of people. And when the people were not able to sustain them, the giants dared (to attack) them, and they devoured the people. And they began to sin with birds and wild animals and reptiles and fish, and to devour one another's flesh, and drink blood. Then the earth appealed against the lawless ones” (1En 7:2-6).

Of course, the Flood comes to destroy all flesh save eight people from the face of the earth because of this wickedness during this second fall—this multiplication of evil on the earth from heaven. But there is still a **third fall**. This fall takes place after the second, and like we saw after the first, it begins **in a city**. The city's name is **Babel** which later becomes **Babylon**, which is the focus of much of the first half of Daniel's book, and especially of chapter 5.

Here's an interesting take on the famous story which adds some connecting information to what we will look at later. It comes down to us through **Eusebius**, the first great Church Historian. He quotes **Eupolemus**, a Jewish historian in a work now lost to time.

Eupolemus states that the Assyrian city of Babylon was first founded by those [after] the Flood. They were **giants**, and

they built the tower well known in history. When the tower was destroyed by God's power, these giants were scattered over the whole earth. Eupolemus holds that Abraham was born in the tenth generation in the Babylonian city Camarina, although others state that the city was named Ourie and that Abraham was born in the thirteenth generation.

(Eusebius, *Prep. For the Gospel* 9.17.2-9)

It is interesting that both of these city names are linked to the name of Ur (which the Bible says Abraham was from) which was the capitol of the moon god Sin (from which we get words like Sinai), and Camarina can also be related to the word *kaminos*, which is the Greek for a furnace (see Daniel 3). Meanwhile, Ourie can also mean “city of the Chaldeans.”

Eusebius then quotes an anonymous source that gives a little more curious background information, and whether it is true or not, it provides some interesting talking points for Daniel 5.

In anonymous works, we find that ... these [giants] dwelt in the land of Babylonia. Because of their impiety, they were destroyed by the gods. One of them, Belos, escaped death and settled in Babylon. He built a tower and lived in it; the

tower was called Belos after its builder ... Abraham [then] learned astrology [which seems to be connected here to the giants].¹

(Eusebius, *Prep. For the Gospel* 9.18.2).

Several things are interesting here. First, Belos is the longer form of Bel, whom we saw in chapter 1 is Marduk, the most important God of Babylon. Marduk has been identified with Nimrod from the Bible.² Curiously, the LXX says that Nimrod “began to be a giant on the earth” (Gen 10:8) and he built Babel/Babylon (10). Importantly, Daniel 5 begins with a new king. He is named Belshazzar (Dan 5:1). Furthermore, I can remember being confused the first few times I read this story because Daniel is called Belteshazzar, and I couldn’t figure out the difference. Was Daniel this new king? No, but it was confusing for me, nonetheless. Both names refer to this god Bel.

Another important point here is this connection of Abram with astrology. Previously, he was in the city of the Chaldeans. Now, this city is connected to the giant god

¹ Both translations and the notes in R. Doran, “Pseudo-Eupolemus,” in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 880-82.

² K. van der Toorn and P. W. van der Horst, “Nimrod Before and After the Bible,” *HTR* 83:1 (1990): 8-9, 16.

Nimrod. Astrology seems to go back to him, even as sorceries went back to the watchers. Finally, he is the builder not only of the city, but of **the tower of Babel**.

Because of all these things—the relationship of the gods and giants and astrology to the building of Babel, because the tower was itself a ziggurat (man-made cosmic mountain where men attempted to call down the gods), and because all mankind came together at this location to do these deeds—God scattered them across the face of the earth by **confusing their languages and tongues**, and ever since that moment, Babel-Babylon became the great anti-city of the Bible, the fullest expression of hostility to God that we can find.

Daniel 5: Same Kingdom, New King

Daniel 5 is that famous chapter that tells us about a **mysterious supernatural handwriting**, a coded message on a wall in the strange words “**mene, mene, tekel, parsin.**” As such, this is often what it is known for. But there is so much more going on here than secret messages on walls. “**Ch. 5 describes an epic moment in history...**” **Yet another fall. “Namely the fall of the great Babylon.”**³ Many prophets

³ James Bejon, “Chapter 5: The Hand of God In World History,” 11, https://www.academia.edu/11809773/Commentary_On_Daniel_Chapter_5_5_1_30_.

predicted this moment. 150 year earlier, Isaiah was told by God, “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. It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there” (Isa 13:17-20). So sure of this prediction was he that he said, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground” (Isa 21:9).

During Isaiah’s lifetime, The Assyrian Empire was the dominant power. But Babylon rebelled against them and in 689 B.C. But, Sennacherib destroyed it saying, “I made its destruction more complete than by a flood. That in days to come the site of that city, and its temples and gods, might not be remembered.”⁴ Still, Isaiah said that it was the Medes, not the Assyrians who would permanently destroy Babylon

⁴ Daniel D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* Vol. 2 (1926-27), 152 in Ryan Foster, “A Prophecy About Babylon Confirms the Accuracy of the Bible,” *Beyond Today* (May 2, 2010), <https://www.ucg.org/beyond-today/a-prophecy-about-babylon-confirms-the-accuracy-of-the-bible>. Some of this history comes from this piece.

and it was Sennacherib, not Isaiah, who was mistaken.⁵ Sixty-three years later (626 B.C.), Babylon rebelled again and this time, she came out on top. **Nabopolassar** became king and reestablished Babylon as a separate kingdom. In 605 B.C., **Nebuchadnezzar** became the king and for the next 40 or so years, he would dominate the world like no other before him.

We have seen the first four chapters of Daniel have been all about this king's transformation from prideful pagan oppressor to humble servant of the LORD. In fact, Jeremiah calls him "my servant" (**Jer 25:9, 27:6; 43:10**). But in 562, Nebuchadnezzar died. Upon his death, **Babylon was thrown into chaos**. Over the course of the next half-dozen years, four kings would rule (Amel-Marduk, known as **Evil-Merodach** (**2Kg 25:27**), **Neriglissar**, **Labishi-Marduk**, and **Nabonidus**, whom we discussed in ch. 4). Nabonidus would rule sometimes directly and other times, when he was absent for long periods out in the desert, through his vice-regent and son, a man named **Belshazzar**.⁶

⁵ It is possible that Isaiah is referring here to the Medes as hired mercenaries of Sennacherib and that he has in mind that defeat, but I find this argument weak. It doesn't matter either way for our purposes, especially because Jeremiah certainly sees the defeat shown in Daniel 5. On mercenaries, see **Homer Heater**, "Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the Eschaton," *JETS* 41.1 (March 1998): 27-28. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1280&context=lts_fac_pubs.

⁶ The following table is in **Bejon**, 19.

Year	Event
626	Nabopolassar rises to power and the age of the Neo-Babylonian kings thus begins
609	Babylon becomes the undisputed superpower of the Near East
605	Nebuchadnezzar (Nabopolassar's son) accedes to the throne
562	Nebuchadnezzar passes away and is succeeded by his son, Amel-Marduk ⁶⁶
560	Amel-Marduk is assassinated and Nergal-sharezer (Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law) accedes to the throne (Jer. 39.3-13)
556	Labashi-Marduk (Nergal-Sharezer's son) accedes to the throne at the tender age of nine
556	Labashi-Marduk is killed, and Nabonidus is appointed as his successor
555	Nabonidus begins to upset Babylon's priests, which gives rise to a tense and disintegrated kingdom
550	Belshazzar (Nabonidus's son) is appointed as Babylon's vice-regent ⁶⁷
539	Cyrus and Darius (the Medo-Persian kings) conquer Babylon

This takes us to [the present chapter](#) which we can date with such precision that I can tell you the events take place on the evening of [Oct. 12, 539 B.C.](#), which we know from secular history. We are fast-forwarding perhaps 25 years from chapter 4.⁷ But this chapter describes not the fate of Babylon from outside secular historians, but from the inside, in the inner chamber of the steward-king whose outlook was to [eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die](#). We get a first-hand look at the self-destruction of a mighty civilization.

⁷ Bejon, 11.

As we move through the chapter, we find that it comes to us in yet another **chiasm**.⁸ In this case, the **central unit** is not one thought unrepeated, but a **dual parallel thought** of the king offering Daniel a reward and the man of God refusing it. We will see why as we move along.

Ref.	Sec.	Description
5.1	A:	Babylon celebrates
5.2-4	» B:	The King defiles the Temple-vessels
5.5-9	»» C:	The writing is inscribed on the wall
5.10-12	»»» D:	The Queen-mother reminds Belshazzar of Daniel's wisdom
5.13-16	»»»» E:	The King offers Daniel a great reward
5.17-18a	»»»» E':	Daniel refuses the King's reward
5.18b-23	»»» D':	Daniel reminds the King of Nebuchadnezzar's conversion
5.24-28	»» C':	The writing on the wall is interpreted
5.29	» B':	The King honours Daniel
5.30	A':	Babylon falls

You also need to remember that in the larger chiasm of chs. 2-7, **chs. 4-5 parallel one another**. Both chapters begin with a **prideful king** (Nebuchadnezzar/Belshazzar). They move to a **divine warning** (dream/writing on the wall). Both have **Daniel interpreting a mystery**. In both, **the king will be punished by God** (insanity/death).⁹ But the key is **the**

⁸ Bejon, 15.

⁹ **Michael Taut**, "Chiasm Parallels Daniel 4/5," (Kona: School of Biblical Studies, 2000). <https://sbsinternational.org/resource-material/daniel/?wpdmdl=1035&ind=2>.

difference in responses between the two men, and as we saw last week, that key difference is the great confession that Nebuchadnezzar makes. I'll return to this at the end.

Importantly, while the basic structure of the chapter and the entire Aramaic unit (chs. 2-7) teach us important things, ch. 5 contains both a narrative and a literary styles full of word-puns, homonyms (words that sound the same but mean different things: like see and sea), homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different meanings) which underpin a much deeper meaning. That meaning is directly related to the place that is falling: Babylon, which means “confusion.” Do you remember the tongues of Babel? Do you remember me saying I was confused by Daniel and this king's name? Well, that is deliberate in the way the Holy Spirit has chosen to tell us this story.

A Great Feast of Meaningless Paganism (Dan 5:1-4)

We begin with King Belshazzar, whose name ironically enough can mean, “Bel, Protect the King” or “Master of Treasure” or “Lord of Destruction Straitened”¹⁰ (Bel = lord), all of which have meaning in this story. The king

¹⁰ Stelman Smith and Judson Cornwall, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 35.

makes a great feast “for a thousand of his lords” and it says he “drank wine in front of the thousand” (Dan 5:1). His drinking could refer to drinking games of some kind¹¹ (like you find in old Nordic tales and in the Lord of the Rings), which is interesting given how the story ends. But those games are done *after* a great military victory, not on the Eve of your own destruction after you had just fought an indecisive war with the enemy that morning!¹² More importantly, contrast ch. 1 where Daniel and his friends were offered the king’s wine and they refused, as it would dishonor God, apparently because that wine was of a religious significance (perhaps like eating meat sacrificed to an idol in the NT).

We immediately see that this is the case with Belshazzar’s feast. It says that “when he tasted the wine, [he] commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in

¹¹ Bejon, 26.

¹² **Going Deeper.** Herodotus describes how there was first an indecisive battle outside the city on the day of this feast, which would be prior to the events in this chapter. Then, the Babylonians shut themselves inside with a huge store of food. Cyrus then diverted the course of the Euphrates by digging a canal into an old reservoir and then marched with his army into the town along the river-bed under the walls. “Because of the great size of the city—so the residents say—after the outer parts of the city had been captured, those living in the centre did not know that the city had fallen, but (they happened to be holding a festival) continued dancing and enjoying themselves, until they discovered the inevitable and their defeat” (Herodotus 1.191). In Michael Hilton, “Babel Reversed—Daniel Chapter 5,” *JSTOT* 66 (1995): 104. https://www.academia.edu/19801930/Babel_Reversed_Daniel_Chapter_5.

Jerusalem be brought” that everyone might drink from them (2). Belshazzar is **mocking and blaspheming the God of Israel** by further desecrating that which is holy by allowing “**lords, wives, and concubines**” (2, 3) to drink from them. These things were set apart by God and only the priests of Israel could use them.

However, in some twisted way, the king may be inviting Yahweh to the table. This is a possibility because of vs. 4. “**They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.**” If this is the case, it must still be viewed as a mockery, because Yahweh has no image of himself, and surely the king would have known this.

I want to begin pointing out **some of the fascinating textual features** of our story so far. First, **gold, silver, bronze, iron** ... this reminds us of chapter 2, when we saw Nebuchadnezzar’s **dream of the idol** made up of these another other substances. The fact that they are also related here to idols is a clear reference back to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream where God swore that he would smash into dust the head of gold—Babylon the Great—and the other kingdoms that would arise after it.

Second, notice the **repetition** in **vv. 2-3**.

Repetition, Addition, and Subtraction in Daniel 5:2-3

Daniel 5:2	Daniel 5:3
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.

This **repetition** along with the **subtraction and addition** brings *clarity* through the words here, so that **we are not confused** by what is going on. **Vs. 3** omits the word “**silver**,” highlighting the gold, that which is most precious. It also omits the names of the kings, because it is going to **emphasize** something through the addition of four English words (three in Aramaic): “**the house of God**.” Someone explains, “**Certainly the author did not feel there was ambiguity in v. 2. It is inconceivable that his readers could have confused ‘the Temple in Jerusalem’ with some other sacred building. Instead, this is the phrase which gives us the narrator’s point of view and emphasizes his concerns. This ravenous act of Belshazzar was more than drunken recklessness. It was blasphemy against the God of Israel,**

whose Temple is in Jerusalem.”¹³ The point I want to make here is that we, the reader, are not going to be confused, but enlightened by the careful choice of words that are being used. Words understood and used the right way bring forth light and clarity and understanding.

The Writing on the Wall (Dan 5:5-9)

On the other hand (that’s meant as a pun as you will see momentarily), for the Babylonians, words become a source of deep confusion. This is illustrated in the Aramaic word for “taken out” (*nephaq*)—Nebuchadnezzar had *taken out* the vessels from God’s house (2, 3). Here, they are using those vessels for evil purposes. But in vs. 5, the same word, which now means (for the only time in all of Biblical Aramaic) “emerged”¹⁴ appears, and this change of meaning results in deep confusion in Babylon as what emerges are the “fingers of a human hand” that begins writing something on the plaster of the wall of the king’s palace, opposite the lampstand. We will soon find out that no one can

¹³ Bill T. Arnold, “Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6,” *JBL* 112/3 (1993): 481, 82.
https://www.academia.edu/2701332/Wordplay_and_Narrative_Techniques_in_Daniel_5_and_6.

¹⁴ The meaning is different because it is a different verbal stem. The first is in the haphel stem; the second is in the peal stem. See Arnold, 479-80 for a discussion.

understand it. Their *taking out* the vessels of God and using them to get drunk in a religious orgy leads to a mysterious hand *emerging* to write an indecipherable message on the wall. It's a subtle word-play, but one that is deliberate.

This is reinforced in another subtle way by **the word-order** of the first six verses. If I said four times, “we ran” “we ran” “we ran” “we ran” and then changed it to “*ran we*” only to go back and start saying “we ran” again, you would take notice, because I don't normally talk **like Yoda**. We find the same subject-verb sequence in the first few verses being changed to a verb-subject sequence in vs. 5 only to return again to the subject-verb in vs. 6.¹⁵

Belshazzar **made**... (1)

Belshazzar **tasted**... (2)

Then [**they**] **brought** ... (3)

They **drank** ... (4)

Suddenly, *came forth* **the fingers** ... (5)

Countenance **changed** ... (6)

So, while *we* are gaining clarity, the exact opposite is beginning to happen to the Babylonians, and both of these

¹⁵ **Arnold**, 481-82.

states of affairs **come because of words**. Sometimes words illumine and other times they become mere ... *babel*.

Let's keep thinking about the story. Two interesting things about **vs. 5** to me are the "**human hand**" and the **lampstand**. Let's look at the lampstand first. The lampstand in the temple went in the holy place and as such it was a very holy item, representing the Tree of Life and the seven spirits of God who sees and knows all. The artifact therefore **reminds of God's house**. However, this lampstand is in the king's palace, and it is probably not Israel's lampstand, although we can't be certain, as he has had many other items from that very place brought into his court. Whether or not it is that lampstand, we are to ask, what do lamps do? **They bring light**. Light allows us to see clearly. In this verse, something is clearly seen, but something else will later be shown to not be seen clearly at all (the meaning of the writing).

That takes us **to the hand**. I don't like the translation "human hand," although I'm not opposed to it, because of the heavenly human figure we find in **Daniel 7:13**. The word is not *adam*, but *enash*, a more general term. To me, it is better to simply translate it as **the hand of a "man."** We have seen a "man" figure who is supernatural in ch. 3, walking with the men in the furnace. But he is clearly a son

of God, a heavenly angelic figure, probably looking more like a watcher from ch. 4. **He is not a human.** (Though, I will add that since some have entertained angels unaware, and since angels are also called “men,” at least some can appear quite human.)

This hand is seen by the king, who is the only one said to have seen it (5). It is clearly a supernatural hand. Given its proximity to the lampstand and that it is supernatural and what it writes, I am reminded of language that in the OT is often used for the Angel of the LORD—Christ in the OT. It is the language of a hand.

Recall that **Moses** was covered in the rock when he saw the LORD’s backside by God’s “**hand**” (**Ex 33:22-23**). This hand shows up earlier in the book in Moses’s song of Pharaoh. He says, “**The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea, and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea ... The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them’ ... Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, *your right hand*, O LORD, shatters the enemy**” (**Ex 15:3-4, 9, 6**). Moses is singing about the Angel of the LORD, Christ, the Right-Hand military

commander of Yahweh who fights and wins the battles of God. We are going to see at the end of this chapter that this is all about war and battles, and so the image is quite fitting.

That this was **no ordinary hand** is clear in the king's reaction. "The king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together" (6). He's terrified. When the Commander of the Armies of God comes a lookin' for you, and all you see is his hand, what would be your reaction?

Belshazzar reacted the same way Nebuchadnezzar did when he had his dreams. He called in the **enchanters**, the **Chaldeans**, and the **astrologers** (7). Remember how the ancient historians said that Abram before being saved was an astrologer? Remember how he came from Babylon? Remember how it was called the city of the Chaldeans? All of that was a discussion that centered on the tower of Babel. The language here harkens back to this third fall of Genesis, man sought to make a name for himself by reaching up to heaven to the gods so God confused and scattered them.

The king promised them, "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" (7). *Third*, because he was

himself second to Nabonidus his father. That's quite a promise, but unfortunately, none of them could read the writing or tell the king the interpretation (8).

The Queen Mother Reminds Belshazzar of Daniel (Dan 5:10-12)

Belshazzar became **even more alarmed**, his color changed, and his lords were perplexed (9). Just then, **the queen mother** enters the banqueting hall “**because of the words of the king and his lords**” (10a). More words are being pointed out. Her words are, “**O king, live forever!**” It's a stock phrase and could be either etiquette or **sarcasm**; given that she was not partaking in the party, and what ends up happening, which surely many in the city knew about, my guess is it is sarcasm.¹⁶ This man is a fool.

She continues, “**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**

¹⁶ “Subordinates also say “O king, live forever!” to King Nebuchadnezzar in 2:4; 3:9; and 6:7, 22 when they perceive his anxiety, but no one except the queen of Daniel □ dares to actually describe to the king what they observe of his physical state.” **Tawny Holm**, “Royal Women Sages in Aramaic Literature: The Unnamed Queen in Daniel 5 and Saritrah in the ‘Revolt of Babylon’.” *From Mari to Jerusalem and Back: Assyriological and Biblical Studies in Honor of Jack Murad Sasson*, ed. A. Azzoni et al (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 157, n. 27. https://www.academia.edu/42158375/Royal_Women_Sages_in_Aramaic_Literature_The_Unnamed_Queen_in_Daniel_5_and_Saritrah_in_the_Revolt_of_Babylon_Pp_151_74_in_From_Mari_to_Jerusalem_and_Back_Assyriological_and_Biblical_Studies_in_Honor_of_Jack_Murad_Sasson_ed_A_Azzoni_et_al_University_Park_Eisenbrauns_2020.

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 Belteshazzar. Now let Daniel be called, and he will show the interpretation” (10b-12).

A few comments can help bring clarity. **First**, while “spirit of the holy gods” is a possible translation, going with most early translators, I like “the Spirit of the Holy God” better. She is clearly singling out the “holy” God.¹⁷ This is because she clearly knows about Nebuchadnezzar’s experiences and his conversion to the One True God who alone is holy. It’s an interesting, but not unheard-of idea in the OT that the Holy Spirit indwells some of his people for special purposes on special occasions. **Second**, Belshazzar should have known this because he was directly related to Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁸ But he’s either too wasted to know or too indifferent to care.

¹⁷ Bejon, 4, n. 21.

¹⁸ “Father” does not have to mean dad, but can mean grandfather or father-in-law. In this case, Belshazzar’s father was Nabonidus who appears to have been Nebuchadnezzar’s son-in-law.

Finally, the wise queen's role in all this is pivotal. Without her appearance in the story, there would be no Daniel to understand the ominous writing, no advance knowledge of the fall of Babylon, and not much of a story. She has the authority to enter the court unannounced because she is the high queen. She alone thinks to summon the skilled and divinely inspired Daniel, because **she alone out of the court is not confused**. She speaks her mind to King Belshazzar with **clarity** and wisdom.¹⁹

Daniel is Offered a Reward (Dan 5:13-16)

So Daniel is brought before the king. And the king says, “You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah?” (13). “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” (14). Here, I think “**spirit of the gods**” is a better translation, because Belshazzar does not use the word “holy” and has been mocking Yahweh the entire night. He does not see God clearly like the queen does. She remembers Nebuchadnezzar; he has forgotten.

The royal family really had a battle of ascending to the throne and assassinations before Nabonidus finally reigned for a while.

¹⁹ **Holm**, 159.

After telling him that none of the wise men could interpret the writing (15), he says that he has heard that Daniel can give interpretations and solve problems. So he offers the same deal to Daniel that he offered the other wise men. “You shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom” (16). (The story adds “clothed with purple” to highlight just how kingly this reward will be!) This is the first half of the center of the story. The king offers Daniel a mighty reward.

Daniel Refuses the Reward (Dan 5:16-17)

The second half gives his answer. “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” (17). Daniel, acting in perfect character, will not accept the tainted rewards of a king in the onset of full out blasphemy. But what we do not yet know is that this reward was itself a completely empty promise in the first place. And Daniel already knew it.

Daniel Reminds the Belshazzar of Nebuchadnezzar's Conversion (Dan 5:18-23)

We can see this because prior to Daniel interpreting the message, he reminds this king of his grandfather's conversion. "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. 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” (Dan 5:18-23).

It is Belshazzar’s **pride**, just like Nebuchadnezzar’s, that gives us the parallel with ch. 4. He has **brazenly set his heart against the Lord of heaven**. The banquet demonstrates it. He mocks his grandfather, even as he pretends not to know anything about the True God. It is Nebuchadnezzar’s humility, or rather humbling, which becomes the great contrast which sets the two chapters apart. For Belshazzar has no intention of humbling himself before the Most High. And the Most High has no intention of humbling him.

The Writing on the Wall Deciphered (Dan 5:24-28)

This takes us to **the most famous part of our story**. It is so famous, 2,500 years later we have a cliché that comes from it—“**the writing is on the wall**.” We all know what that means. The end is near. But that takes us ahead of ourselves.

Daniel directly links the writing from the hand to the presence of the Most High. “From his Presence the hand was sent” (24). “Presence” is not in the Aramaic. But it is a great word choice to describe what is happening. Something goes out from the Most High. In the OT, “presence” is another word that often describes the Angel of the LORD. He is the presence or “face” of God to man. In this way, the presence and hand work in tandem to tell the us that God himself is inscribing the writing.

This is what it said: “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, AND PARSIN” (25). This is repeated again in vv. 26-28, except only one MENE is given. Now, to us, this sounds like gibberish, like ... babel. The thing is, as it is written here, it would not have been babel to the king, for this is Aramaic, the official language of the court!

This has caused no small amount of discussion over the millennia. One rabbi said the letters were written in an *atbash* code where the first letter of the alphabet is replaced by the last, the second by the penultimate, and so on. That’s why they couldn’t read it. Others had the letters of each word written backwards. Perhaps the most famous has the letters being written in four columns, vertically rather than

horizontally. This was depicted by Rembrandt in his painting Belshazzar's Feast.



S	Y	T	M	M
Y	P	Q	N	N
N	R	L	'	'

Rembrandt, Belshazzar's Feast, Oil on Canvas
National Gallery, London (Wikimedia commons)

Finally, one said there was no mystery or code, that everyone could read it, but **only Daniel could understand the meaning.**²⁰

As for the meaning itself, here's **the traditional understanding.** *Mene* is said to mean “**numbered.**” Hence, Daniel says in **vs. 26**, “**MENE, God has numbered the days**

²⁰ See the discussion in Michael **Hilton**, 105-106, https://www.academia.edu/19801930/Babel_Reversed_Daniel_Chapter_5.

of your kingdom and brought it to an end.” *Tekel* is said to mean “weighed.” Hence, Daniel says in the next verse, “TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting” (27). Finally, *Parsin* is said to mean “divided.” Hence, vs. 28, “PERES, your kingdom is divided ...” In fact, one translation (Young’s Literal) even gives these words rather than the Aramaic.

But here’s the problem. Perhaps you notice that “PARSIN” is not the same as PERES.” In fact, none of the words in vs. 25b are exactly the same as 26-28:

Vs. 25	vv. 26-28	Root
<i>mene'</i>		
<i>mene'</i>	<i>menah</i> (numbered)	<i>MNY</i>
<i>teqel</i>	<i>teqiltah</i> (weighed)	<i>TQL</i>
<i>parsin</i>	<i>perisat</i> (divided)	<i>PRS</i>

Daniel’s words do mean what he said, but they are different from the original words. He is giving an interpretation.

But we know what the original words mean. They describe a series of weights or weight-stones. A *mina* was 60 shekels (about .5kg). A *teqel*, as you can perhaps hear is a variant of a shekel. And a *parsin* is half a mina, and according to the form of the word, there seems to be two of them

here.²¹ Assuming this was not in a code, everyone in the room would have understood this. With these stones, you would weigh on a balance the quantity of say gold or silver that a person wanted to sell.

Mina	.5kg
Teqel	.0833333 kg.
Parsin	.25 kg.

It seems to be that the answer Daniel gives has to be related somehow to the weight-stones. But it is not easy in translations to see how this might be. James Bejon explains how that would be. Here's what Daniel is saying. Babylon is the *mina*, the kingdom of vs. 25. It has been numbered at 60 shekels. It is thus very weighty and valuable. Belshazzar is the *tekel* who has been weighed against the *mina*. As a *tekel* weighs only 1/60th of a *mina*, on a scale, it rises. Hence, he is barely worth anything in comparison to mighty Babylon. In fact, he's so light he probably flies off the scale! So, the *tekel*-king is replaced on the scale with two *parsins*. When they are weighed against the *mina*, the balance is equal. Two *parsins* equal one *mina*. Therefore, "the kingdom is divided

²¹ Bejon, 64 and notes 164 and 165.

and given to the Medes and Persians” (28) who are worth 30x each more than Belshazzar. It’s a fair trade.²²

But here’s *the irony* of all this. I can grant Belshazzar a little slack in not understanding the interpretation. After all, God is the one who grants meaning to words. And if he has hidden it, that is up to him. But the king not only wants to know the interpretation he wants the astrologers to “*read this writing*” (7). In fact, they could not even read it (8), and they are the wise men of Babylon!

What’s the irony? Oh, it is thick. Daniel has pointed out that Belshazzar is supposed to have inherited his father’s kingship over “*all peoples, nations, and languages*” (19). So someone writes, “*How absurd that the King should call himself by this title, when this is Babel, the city where misunderstanding started! Here of all places it should be realized that god alone is master of all languages!*”²³

This thought rightly leads us *back to the tower of Babel story*. Hilton has shown that our story and that story are parallel.

They mark the beginning and end of Babylon. As Babylon was born in misunderstanding and confusion of languages, so it

²² For this fascinating discussion see *Bejon*, 54-68.

²³ *Hilton*, 106.

ends in the same way. As God intervened directly at the start of Babylon's history, so he intervenes again at its end. For he is the God of all history. Both stories are stories of *hubris*, of the arrogance of people who are under the illusion that they have power ...

In some respects, then, the Daniel story reverses that in Genesis—it begins with many languages, where Genesis begins with one language: in other respects the two stories are parallel—showing how God's purpose cannot be frustrated ... The Genesis story has ... very complex word-plays which reflect the themes of the story—pride, language, confusion. In the unity of the language which exists at Babel people exchange ideas—let us build a tower! Let it have its top in the heavens! In their unity of language they play on words—they use *lebenah* (brick) and *eben* (stone) and *chemar* (bitumen/tar) and *chomer* (mortar). But Daniel lives ... after Babel [in a world of many languages and confusion]. Is it a coincidence that Belshazzar's men drink *chamar* (wine)—a word with an identical root to [mortar], but with a completely different meaning? Or that Daniel, our hero, has two names in different languages, one of which (Belshazzar) is practically identical with that of the King? Words are no longer what they seem after Babel.

The whole story is mocking Babel in the way that it is told. And how will that mockery end? In Babylon's final destruction.

The Fall of Babylon (Dan 5:29-31)

There are many more of these kinds of plays going on between the stories,²⁴ but **the last three verses** give us the closing one here. It tells us that as soon as the king heard Daniel read and interpret the writing, he “**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. That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old**” (**Dan 5:29-31**).

After Daniel had refused, because he knew the end was very near, the king carried out his promise anyway. He was given the great honor of third in the kingdom ... a **kingdom that wouldn't even last the night**. He might be able to clothe Daniel and confer a title, “**but it signifies nothing—mere words! It is thus seen to be as empty as the building of the**

²⁴ See **Hilton**, especially 105-110.

Tower of Babel: it is an irrelevant gesture, which will come to nothing.”²⁵ Babylon is no more. Her mockery of God has ended.

Is God’s Word Babel to you or the Word of Clarity?

In our story, God’s message is given to everyone. But it is only the person of insight, of wisdom, and of understanding who can truly know what it means. Hilton concludes, “Before Babel everyone could understand God’s role—but now no longer does he punish openly: his role is to write words his servants can understand, whereas to those who do not understand his language, his influence on history is no longer revealed ... Ironically, the story is told entirely in Aramaic ... the confusion brought to the world after Babel is reflected in the book of Daniel itself, which is written in two languages ... Daniel has two names, Hebrew and Aramaic,”²⁶ and so on.

Daniel is a book all about the fall of human kingdoms. We build. We become full of pride and arrogance. We forget the God of heaven and earth. And God comes in to knock us down from our prideful mountain top. In this case,

²⁵ Hilton, 109.

²⁶ Ibid., 110.

the head of gold has been chopped off and given to a torso of silver, less valuable by half, but with the two nations of the Medes and Persians, almost of equal value.

Isaiah had predicted that Babylon would never rise again. And she hasn't. Yet, Revelation picks up Isaiah's language, which many therefore think refers to our own future in some kind of rebuilt Babylon.²⁷ "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast" (Rev 18:2). Those unclean spirits and demons refer to the abominations created by the giants of old, in fact they refer to their disembodied haunting spirits. I say that to simply reinforce that [this was a place of true evil](#).

And yet, for all of her evil, for all of her adulteries with the world, God called Abram out of her and saved him and made him into a great nation. God favored her in the days of Nebuchadnezzar and he saved that king out of her temptuous bosom, even as he was with his servant Daniel and his friends and all his people in exile. He did all this [through clear words](#), the word of his Gospel, Christ the stone, Christ the savior from fire, Christ the Sovereign over king's hearts and lives,

²⁷ See [Heater's](#) article on why it probably doesn't.

Christ the hand. Nebuchadnezzar confessed God and bowed himself to the Most High. Belshazzar refused.

It is [the words of the Gospel alone that brings clarity](#) and understanding in a world full of babel and lies. Those who do not understand will remain unrepentant and lost like Belshazzar. Hear the truth so that you may not perish in your way. God the Father sent this Son to die for you, that you who trust in him might have life and light and clarity and understanding. For those who will not hear, who close their hardened ears and stubborn hearts, all that's left is Babylon, who has fallen.

I do not know or much care if Babylon will be rebuilt one day in our future. For spiritually speaking, Babylon is the world beast harlot who tempts us all away from the kingdom of God and of his Christ. The temptations of this ancient city portrayed as a harlot by Revelation have never gone away. Perhaps they have only increased. But [God's message is to all](#). The person of faith is the one who understands it. Before Babel, everyone saw God's role. But now no longer. He writes his role for his servants to see and understand. Those who do not understand his language can no longer see his influence on history. But it is there nonetheless, whether you see or are blind. Ask Belshazzar,

last king of Babylon. Hear the words of the living God, for they are the words of clarity, precision, and truth in a world of babel. Then, repent like Nebuchadnezzar, turn to the living and loving Christ before it is too late.

Bibliography

- Arnold, Bill T. "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/3 (1993): 479-485.
https://www.academia.edu/2701332/Wordplay_and_Narrative_Techniques_in_Daniel_5_and_6.
- Bejon, James. "Chapter 5: The Hand of God In World History," 1-111.
https://www.academia.edu/11809773/Commentary_On_Daniel_Chapter_5_5_1_30.
- Doran, R. "Pseudo-Eupolemus." *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2. Ed. James H. Charlesworth. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985: 873-82.
- Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel*.
- Eupolemus, *On the Jews*.
- Foster, Ryan. "A Prophecy About Babylon Confirms the Accuracy of the Bible." *Beyond Today* (May 2, 2010). <https://www.ucg.org/beyond-today/a-prophecy-about-babylon-confirms-the-accuracy-of-the-bible>.
- Heater, Homer. "Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the Eschaton." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41.1 (March 1998): 23-43.
https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1280&context=lts_fac_pubs.
- Herodotus, *Histories*.

- Hilton, Michael. "Babel Reversed—Daniel Chapter 5." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 66 (1995): 99-111.
https://www.academia.edu/19801930/Babel_Reversed_Daniel_Chapter_5.
- Holm, Tawny. "Royal Women Sages in Aramaic Literature: The Unnamed Queen in Daniel 5 and Saritrah in the 'Revolt of Babylon'." *From Mari to Jerusalem and Back: Assyriological and Biblical Studies in Honor of Jack Murad Sasson*, ed. A. Azzoni et al (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020).151-74.
https://www.academia.edu/42158375/Royal_Women_Sages_in_Aramaic_Literature_The_Unnamed_Queen_in_Daniel_5_and_Saritrah_in_the_Revolt_of_Babylon_Pp_151_74_in_From_Mari_to_Jerusalem_and_Back_Assyriological_and_Biblical_Studies_in_Honor_of_Jack_Murad_Sasson_ed_A_Azzoni_et_al_University_Park_Eisenbrauns_2020.
- Smith, Stelman and Judson Cornwall. *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names*. North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998.
- Taut, Michael. "Chiasm Parallels Daniel 4/5." Kona: School of Biblical Studies, 2000.
<https://sbsinternational.org/resource-material/daniel/?wpdmdl=1035&ind=2>.
- van der Toorn, K. and P. W. van der Horst. "Nimrod Before and After the Bible," *Harvard Theological Review* 83:1 (1990): 1-29.