

THE WRITTING ON THE WALL

Theme: This chapter illustrates the final overthrow of the Gentile world domination through the picture of the overthrow of Babylon.

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The last six chapters of the book of Daniel are prophetic; but the first six provide the personal history of Daniel. They give us the background for the prophetic messages God gave through him. Roughly speaking, Chapters 1 and 2 deal with Daniel's youth, Chapters 3 and 4 with his middle-age, and Chapters 5 and 6 with events near the end of his life. As we come to Chapters 5 and 6, we're reading of the story of Daniel's remarkable transition, as a Jew, from a high position of leadership in one world empire to a high position of leadership in another--truly something remarkable in history.

This chapter deals with the downfall of the Babylonian empire (the head of gold that we read about in Chapter 2) and the domination of the Median-Persian empire (the arms of silver). History records that this transition occurred in just one night (October 11 or 12th, 539 B.C.). The events of that night are prophesied in Isaiah 13:17-22; 21:1-10 and Jeremiah 51:33-58.

Several things need to be noted to appreciate the events in this chapter:

- First, the prophet background concerning the events in Daniel's interpretation was already given to him; that is, the prophecies in Chapters 7 and 8 had already been given to Daniel earlier in the reign of Belshazzar (see 7:1 and 8:1). By the time Daniel spoke the things he said to the king in this chapter, he had already known of them. They were simply now being revealed to the king.
- Second, though these things were new to Belshazzar, his conduct was inexcusable, because he clearly knew the things that had happened to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar as they are recorded in Chapter 4. (See Daniel's rebuke in 5:22-23.) Belshazzar's behavior in the first few verses, therefore, constituted a consciously defiant act of rebellion against the God of Israel.
- Third, while the events of Chapter 5 were going on, the Median-Persian armies led by Darius were already working to penetrate the seemingly-impregnable capital of the Babylonian empire. The Euphrates River ran underneath the capital city; and Darius simply re-routed the river, which allowed his army to march through the riverbed and under the city walls--taking the city by surprise and without contest. Thus, the rule of the world changed hands overnight--both as a judgment of God on Belshazzar, and in fulfillment of God's word to Daniel.
- The events of this chapter prefigure the events described in Revelation 17-18; that is, the story of the wicked world religious system symbolized as the woman, Mystery Babylon the Great, the kings that align themselves with the beast, and the fall of the wicked city Babylon.

I. BELSHAZZAR'S ARROGANT FEAST (vv. 1-4).

The king spoken of here--Belshazzar--is best understood as the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar; and as the son and co-regnant of his absent father Nabonidus. Perhaps in his father's absence, he felt free to live recklessly and throw a feast. Along the way, he called for the vessels that his grandfather had taken from the temple in Jerusalem in his deportation of the Jewish people. These holy vessels--set aside for God's glory--were being used in a wild and wanton drinking party; and were even being used to toast the false gods of Babylon. This illustrates to us how wicked this king was behaving. No wonder God's judgment

was at hand!

II. GOD'S OMINOUS ANNOUNCEMENT (vv. 5-9).

We're told that, "In the same hour"--that is, in the same hour as the king and his crowd toasted their gods--a man's hand appeared and wrote on the plaster wall in the king's palace. The fact that it was a whitened plaster--and that it was opposite the lamp--all suggest that the hand and the writing were clearly seen. The terrified king called for his astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers--all his wise men--and promised great honors and power to whoever would give the interpretation of the mysterious writing. But no one could. This is perhaps meant to make the entry of Daniel on to the scene even more dramatic (see also 4:7-9). The fact that no interpretation could be given made the king and his counselors even more terrified.

III. THE QUEEN'S RESPECTFUL APPEAL (vv. 10-12).

The queen spoken of here is most likely Belshazzar's mother. She would have been old enough to remember that Daniel had proven himself to be a man of God with greater wisdom than all the other wise men; and also the way that he had ministered to Belshazzar's father Nebuchadnezzar. Note that she says that in him was "the Spirit of the Holy God" (v. 11)--suggesting that she may have held to some remnant of the faith that Nebuchadnezzar had eventually professed. She encouraged Belshazzar to call for Daniel and seek that he give the interpretation.

IV. DANIEL'S STERN REBUKE (vv. 13-23).

The fact that Daniel was not present at this feast may indicate that he had retired from direct political service to this empire. Or it may be because he was too holy a man to have been present at such a party. In any case, he honored Belshazzar's authority and came at his call. It speaks a great deal about this king's ignorance and shallow character that he had to ask Daniel who he was (v. 13). He offered honor and power to Daniel; but Daniel refused the offer--either because he felt no need for it, or because he knew that what was offered wouldn't be of any value in just a short while. Nevertheless, he said that he would give the interpretation.

Note that he preceded the interpretation with a strong rebuke. He pointed back to the story of Belshazzar's grandfather (see Chapter 4); and of how God had humbled him in order to demonstrate that He rules over the affairs of men. "But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this. And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven" (vv. 22-23a).

V. THE WRITING'S SOLEMN INTERPRETATION (vv. 24-28).

It was in this context that Daniel gave the interpretation. Note that Daniel explains that the fingers of the hand were sent by the very God that Belshazzar had mocked (v. 24). The words themselves have been variously translated; but the meaning is given clearly to us in verses 25-27--"MENE [literally a mina, that is 50 shekels; from the verb "to number"]: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL [literally a shekel; from the verb, "to weigh"]: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; PERSES [literally a half shekel; from the verb "to divide"]: Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (vv. 26-28). The fact that the first word MENE is given twice suggests the severe certainty of judgment.

VI. THE KING'S WORTHLESS HONOR (v. 29).

The king responded by honoring Daniel; and made him 'third ruler' (perhaps second to Nebonidus and Belshazzar). Daniel perhaps received these things in humble obedience; but they were of no value.

VII. THE EMPIRE'S SUDDEN FALL (vv. 30-31).

"That very night", we're told, Belshazzar was slain, and Darius the Mede received the kingdom. As the Scriptures warn, "He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy (Proverbs 29:1). What a picture this is of the truth of that warning!