

Belshazzar's Feast and the Fall of Babylon (October 11, 539 BC)

Daniel 5

Belshazzar's Feast

- 1 Belshazzar the king made a great festival for *a* thousand of his lords, and in the presence of the thousand *lords* he was drinking wine.
- 2 When he tasted the wine, Belshazzar commanded *that they bring the* vessels of gold and silver that Nebuchadnezzar his predecessor had taken from the temple that *was* in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines may drink from them.
- 3 Then they brought in the vessels of gold that they took from the temple, the house of God that *was* in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from them.
- 4 They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone.

The Writing on the Wall

- 5 Immediately human fingers appeared and they wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the palace of the king, and the king was watching the palm of the hand that was writing.
- 6 Then his face changed and his thoughts terrified him, and his hip joints gave way and his knees knocked together.
- 7 The king cried aloud to bring *in* the conjurers, the astrologers and the diviners; the king spoke and said to *the* wise men of Babylon, "Any man that can read this writing and can tell me its explanation will be clothed *in* purple and *will have a* necklace of gold *hung* around his neck and he will rule *as* third *in authority* in the kingdom."
- 8 Then all the wise men of the king came in, but they were not able to read the writing or to make known its explanation.
- 9 Then the king, Belshazzar, became greatly terrified, and his facial features changed upon him, and his lords were perplexed.

Daniel Summoned

- 10 Because of the words of the king and his lords, the queen came into the banqueting hall and the queen spoke up and said, "O king, live forever, and let not your thoughts terrify you and *do* not let your facial expressions grow pale.
- 11 There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. And in the days of your predecessor, enlightenment and insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods was found in him; and, O king, Nebuchadnezzar your predecessor appointed him *as* chief of the magicians, the conjurers, the astrologers, *and* the diviners. Your predecessor the king *did this*
- 12 because *there* was found in him *an* excellent spirit and understanding and insight *for* interpreting dreams and explaining riddles and solving riddles; *that is*, in Daniel whom the king named Belteshazzar. Now, let Daniel be called and he will tell the explanation."
- 13 Then Daniel was brought in before the king, *and* the king spoke and said to Daniel, "You *are* Daniel who are one of the exiles of Judah whom my predecessor, the king, brought from Judah.
- 14 And I have heard that a spirit of the gods *is* in you and enlightenment and insight and excellent wisdom was found in you.
- 15 And now the wise men *and* the conjurers were brought in before me so that they could read this writing *in order to* make its explanation known to me, but they were not able to disclose the explanation of the matter.
- 16 But I have heard concerning you that you are able to produce interpretations and to solve riddles; now if you are able to read the writing and to make known its explanation to me, you will be clothed *in* purple and *a* necklace of gold *will be placed* around your neck and you will rule *as* third *in command* in the kingdom."

A Refusal and a Rebuke

- 17 Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself or your rewards give to another; nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and I will make known to him the explanation.
- 18 O king, the Most High God gave the kingdom and the greatness and the glory and the majesty to Nebuchadnezzar your predecessor.
- 19 And because of the greatness that he gave to him, all the peoples, the nations and languages trembled and feared before him; whomever he wanted he killed, and whomever he wanted he let live, and whomever he wanted he honored, and whomever he wanted he humbled.
- 20 But when his heart became arrogant and his spirit became hard *so as* to act proudly, he was deposed from the throne of his kingdom and the glory was taken away from him.
- 21 And he was driven away from human society and his mind was made like the animals and his dwelling *was* with the wild asses; *and* he was given grass like oxen to eat, and with the dew of heaven his body was bathed, until he acknowledged that the Most High God *is* sovereign over the kingdom of humankind, and whoever he wants he sets over it.
- 22 "But you his successor, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart even though you knew all this.
- 23 And *now* you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven, and the vessels of his temple you have brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have been drinking wine from them, and you have praised the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone that *do* not see and *do* not hear and *do* not know, but the God who holds your life in his hand and all of your ways come from him, you have not honored.
- 24 So then the palm of the hand was sent out from his presence and this writing was inscribed.

The Writing Explained

25 “Now this was the writing that was inscribed: ‘Mene, Mene, Tekel and Parsin.’

26 “This *is* the explanation of the matter: ‘Mene’—God has numbered your kingdom and brought an end *to* it.

27 “‘Tekel’—you have been weighed on scales and you have been found wanting.

28 “‘Peres’—your kingdom has been divided and given to *the* Medes and Persians.”

29 Then Belshazzar commanded, and they clothed Daniel *with* purple and *placed* a necklace of gold around his neck, and they made a proclamation concerning him that he would be *the* third ruler *in authority* in the kingdom.

The Fall of Babylon

30 That same night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed.

31 And Darius the Mede received the kingdom when he was about sixty-two years old.

Darius’ New Government (November 7–24, 539 BC)

Daniel 6:1–2

1 It pleased Darius, and he set up one hundred and twenty satraps over the kingdom, that they were throughout the whole kingdom,

2 and over them *were* three administrators, *of* whom Daniel *was* one, *so* that these satraps were giving account to them, and the king would not be suffering loss.

Daniel Set Above All the Governors (November 25, 539 – February 21, 538 BC)

Daniel 6:3

3 Then Daniel began distinguishing himself above the administrators and the satraps because an exceptional spirit *was* in him, and *so* the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom.

Daniel and the Lion’s Den (February–March, 538 BC)

Daniel 6:4–28

The Plot

4 Then the *other* administrators and satraps began to seek to find *a* pretext against Daniel in connection with the kingdom, but they were not able to find any pretext and corruption because he was trustworthy, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him.

5 Then these men said, “We will not find any pretext against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.”

6 So the administrators and the satraps conspired with respect to the king and so they said to him, “Darius, O king, live forever!

7 All of *the* administrators of the kingdom, and the prefects, the satraps, the counselors and the governors took counsel *and have* agreed to establish an edict of the king and to enforce a decree that whoever will seek a prayer from any god or human except from you *for* up to thirty days will be thrown into the lion pit.

8 Now, O king, establish the edict and you must sign the document *so* that *it* cannot be changed, according to *the* law of *the* Medes and Persians which cannot be revoked.”

9 So the king, Darius, signed the writing and the interdict.

The Accusation and Condemnation of Daniel

10 Now when Daniel realized that the document was signed, he went to his house (now he had windows in his upper room that were open toward Jerusalem), and three times daily he knelt on his knees and prayed and *gave* praise before his God, just as he had been doing previously.

11 Then these men came as a group and they found Daniel praying and pleading for mercy before his God.

12 Then they approached and spoke with the king concerning the edict of the king, “Did you not sign an edict that any person who would seek *anything* from any God or human within thirty days except from you, O king, would be thrown into the lion pit?” The king answered and said, “The matter *as you have just stated* is certain according to *the* law of *the* Medes and Persians which cannot be revoked.”

13 Then they responded and said before the king, “Daniel, who *is* from the exiles of Judah, is not paying any attention to you, O king, or to the decree that you have signed, and three times daily he says his prayer.”

14 Then the king, when he heard that report, he was extremely distressed over it; and concerning Daniel he was determined to rescue him. And until the setting of the sun he was making every effort to deliver him.

15 Then these men came as *a* group to the king and said, “Recall, O king, that *with respect to the* law of *the* Medes and Persians that any decree or edict that the king establishes cannot be changed.”

16 Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought in and they threw *him* into the lion pit. The king said to Daniel, “Your God, whom you serve faithfully, may he rescue you!”

17 And a stone was brought and it was put on the entrance of the pit, and the king sealed it with his signet *ring* and with the signet *rings* of his lords, so that nothing would be changed concerning Daniel.

18 Then the king went to his palace and spent the night in fasting, and no food was brought in before him and his sleep fled from him.

The Deliverance of Daniel

19 Then the king got up at daybreak, at first light, and he went in haste to the lion pit.

20 And when he came near to the pit, he cried out to Daniel with *a* distressed voice, *and* the king spoke and said to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, your God whom you serve faithfully, was he able to rescue you from the lions?”

21 Then Daniel spoke to the king, “O king, live forever!”

22 My God sent his angel and he shut the mouth of the lions and they did not hurt me, because before him I was found blameless, and also before you, O king, I have not done *any* wrong.”

23 Then the king was exceedingly glad over it and commanded *that* Daniel be lifted up from the pit; and *there* was not any wound found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

The Accusers Killed and Daniel’s God Honored

24 The king then commanded, and these men were brought who had accused Daniel, and they threw them and their children and their wives into the lion pit, and they had not reached the floor of the pit before the lions had overpowered them and they had crushed all of their bones.

25 Then Darius the king wrote to all the people, the nations, and the languages living in the whole earth, “May your prosperity become great!

26 I make a decree that in all the dominion of my kingdom *people* will be trembling and fearing before the God of Daniel, for he *is* the living God and endures forever and his kingdom *is* one that will not be destroyed and his dominion has no end.

27 *He is* rescuing, delivering, and working signs and wonders in the heavens and on earth, for he *has* rescued Daniel from the power of the lions.”

Daniel Prospers in the Medo-Persian Empire

28 So this Daniel prospered during the kingdom of Darius and during the kingdom of Cyrus the Persian.

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Chronological Notes

1) Historical Setting of Daniel 5.¹

- A) According to Daniel 5:30, Babylon fell to the Persian army shortly after the disastrous end of Belshazzar’s banquet. The Persians marched into Babylon on October 12, 539 (16 Tishri 539). Therefore the banquet that is the historical setting of Daniel 5 must have been on the evening of October 11, 539.
- B) At the end of chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar had recovered from his insanity and regained his throne. He then died in 562 BC. If the final events of Daniel 4 occurred during the last year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, then Daniel 5 begins twenty-three years later, in 539 BC. However, if Nebuchadnezzar’s insanity ended about 570 BC, then about thirty years has passed between the end of Daniel 4 and the events in Daniel 5.
- C) Much had happened in the years between Nebuchadnezzar’s death and Belshazzar’s feast. Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by his son Amel-marduk, who reigned two short years from 562–560. Amel-marduk was assassinated, and his brother-in-law, Neriglissar, seized the throne and ruled from 560 to 556. Neriglissar was succeeded by his young son Labashi-marduk, who reigned only a few months in 556. He was deposed in a rebellion that brought one of the members of the coup, Nabonidus, to the throne.
- D) Nabonidus reigned from 556 BC until the fall of Babylon to the Persians in 539. He proved to be singularly unpopular in Babylon because of his devotion to the god Sin instead of the patron god of Babylon, Marduk (also called Bel). In response

¹ Sourced from Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2008): 259.

to this unpopularity, Nabonidus installed his son Belshazzar as coregent and voluntarily exiled himself to Tema in the Arabian Desert for some ten years. The commonly accepted date for the beginning of Belshazzar's coregency is 553, although there is good evidence that it did not begin until 550. Nabonidus was in Babylon again in 539. With the Persian army approaching Babylon, Nabonidus left the city and met Cyrus in battle at Sippar two days before the fall of Babylon. The Babylonian troops were routed by the Persians, and Nabonidus fled. He later returned to Babylon after its fall to the Persians and surrendered himself. Cyrus allowed him to live the remainder of his life in Carmania according to Berosus. Therefore the sequence of Babylonian rulers after Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 to the fall of Babylon in 539 is as follows:

- Amel-marduk (562–560)
- Neriglissar (560–556)
- Labashi-marduk (556)
- Nabonidus (556–539), with coregent Belshazzar (553–539 or 550–539)

2) Historical Setting of Daniel 6.²

- A) In Daniel 5:31, Darius the Mede (Cyrus the Persian) "received the kingdom," and in Daniel 6:1, Darius decides to place satraps over the conquered kingdom of Babylon. It is obvious that Daniel 6 took place shortly after the fall of Babylon to the Persians.
- B) The city of Babylon was entered by the Persian commander Gubaru on 16 Tishri 539 BC (October 12, 539). The Persian king Cyrus arrived in Babylon on 3 Heshvan 539 (October 29, 539). He appointed Gubaru governor and other officials were appointed under Gubaru. However, Gubaru died on 11 Heshvan (November 6, 539). Babylonian records do not reveal who was ruler of Babylon under Cyrus between 11 Heshvan 539 and the beginning of Cyrus' first official year on 1 Nisan 538 (March 24, 538). However, almost thirty cuneiform tablets from Cyrus' first year speak of "Cyrus, king of lands, Cambyses, king of Babylon," indicating that Cyrus' son Cambyses was placed on the throne of Babylon as coregent with his father. Moreover, Cambyses took part in the New Year's festival honoring the patron god of Babylon, Marduk (Bel)—a privilege reserved for Babylon's king. However, probably due to the difficulty Cambyses had working with Babylonian officials, he was removed from the throne nine months later and replaced by a governor named Gubaru (a different man than the now-deceased Persian commander by the same name). Beginning with the tenth month of his first year, Cyrus is called "king of Babylon, king of lands." Gubaru remained governor beyond Cyrus' death until Cambyses' fifth year as king over the Persian Empire.
- C) We should note that Daniel was Cyrus' presumptive choice to be the person placed over the entire kingdom of Babylon (6:2). However, nowhere does Daniel 6 say that he was placed in that position. Instead, we are only told that Daniel "prospered" during the reign of Cyrus (6:28) and lived until at least Cyrus' third year (10:1). Given the trouble Cyrus had with jealousy among officials in Babylon (as evidenced by the account in Daniel 6), it appears that he decided instead to place his son Cambyses in charge. Therefore, Daniel was probably not promoted to the position of governor, though he appears to have retained important influence in the affairs of the kingdom.
- D) Thus the events of Daniel 6 take place between Cyrus' arrival in the city of Babylon in October 539 and the naming of Cambyses as king of Babylon in late March 538. We can construct a possible chronology for the events in Daniel 6 as follows:
- **3 Heshvan (October 29) 539 BC** – Cyrus arrived in Babylon and appointed Gubaru governor.
 - **4–10 Heshvan (October 30–November 5) 539** – Gubaru began appointing satraps.
 - **11 Heshvan (November 6) 539** – Gubaru died.
 - **12–29 Heshvan (November 7–24) 539** – Cyrus completed appointing satraps and placed three overseers (including Daniel) over the satraps (instead of a new governor; Daniel 6:1–2).
 - **Kislev 539–Shebta 538 (November 25, 539–February 21, 538)** – Daniel distinguished himself; Cyrus planned to appoint him as governor of the kingdom of Babylon (Daniel 6:3).
 - **Late Shebat–Adar 538 (Late February–March 23, 538)** – The plot against Daniel was hatched. Daniel rescued from the lions' den.
 - **1 Nisan (March 24) 538** – At the beginning of Cyrus' first official year, Cambyses was made king of Babylon and took part in New Year's festival in Babylon.

² Sourced from Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2008): 301–303.