

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

Daniel 5

Belshazzar's Feast

1 King Belshazzar prepared a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles, and he was drinking wine in front of them all.

2 While under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar issued an order to bring in the gold and silver vessels—the ones that Nebuchadnezzar his father had confiscated from the temple in Jerusalem—so that the king and his nobles, together with his wives and his concubines, could drink from them.

3 So they brought the gold and silver vessels that had been confiscated from the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, together with his wives and concubines, drank from them.

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

The Writing on the Wall

5 At that very moment the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the royal palace wall, opposite the lampstand. The king was watching the back of the hand that was writing.

6 Then all the color drained from the king's face and he became alarmed. The joints of his hips gave way, and his knees began knocking together.

7 The king called out loudly to summon the astrologers, wise men, and diviners. The king proclaimed to the wise men of Babylon that anyone who could read this inscription and disclose its interpretation would be clothed in purple and have a golden collar placed on his neck and be third ruler in the kingdom.

8 So all the king's wise men came in, but they were unable to read the writing or to make known its interpretation to the king.

9 Then King Belshazzar was very terrified, and he was visibly shaken. His nobles were completely dumbfounded.

Daniel Summoned

10 Due to the noise caused by the king and his nobles, the queen mother then entered the banquet room. She said, "O king, live forever! Don't be alarmed! Don't be shaken!"

11 There is a man in your kingdom who has within him a spirit of the holy gods. In the days of your father, he proved to have insight, discernment, and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father appointed him chief of the magicians, astrologers, wise men, and diviners.

12 Thus there was found in this man Daniel, whom the king renamed Belteshazzar, an extraordinary spirit, knowledge, and skill to interpret dreams, solve riddles, and decipher knotty problems. Now summon Daniel, and he will disclose the interpretation."

13 So Daniel was brought in before the king. The king said to Daniel, "Are you that Daniel who is one of the captives of Judah, whom my father the king brought from Judah?"

14 I have heard about you, how there is a spirit of the gods in you, and how you have insight, discernment, and extraordinary wisdom.

15 Now the wise men and astrologers were brought before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation. But they were unable to disclose the interpretation of the message.

16 However, I have heard that you are able to provide interpretations and to decipher knotty problems. Now if you are able to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, you will wear purple and have a golden collar around your neck and be third ruler in the kingdom."

A Refusal and a Rebuke

17 But Daniel replied to the king, "Keep your gifts, and give your rewards to someone else! However, I will read the writing for the king and make known its interpretation.

18 As for you, O king, the most high God bestowed on your father Nebuchadnezzar a kingdom, greatness, honor, and majesty.

19 Due to the greatness that he bestowed on him, all peoples, nations, and language groups were trembling with fear before him. He killed whom he wished, he spared whom he wished, he exalted whom he wished, and he brought low whom he wished.

20 And when his mind became arrogant and his spirit filled with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and his honor was removed from him.

21 He was driven from human society, his mind was changed to that of an animal, he lived with the wild donkeys, he was fed grass like oxen, and his body became damp with the dew of the sky, until he came to understand that the most high God rules over human kingdoms, and he appoints over them whomever he wishes.

22 "But you, his son Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, although you knew all this.

23 Instead, you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven. You brought before you the vessels from his temple, and you and your nobles, together with your wives and concubines, drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver, gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone—gods that cannot see or hear or comprehend! But you have not glorified the God who has in his control your very breath and all your ways!

24 Therefore the palm of a hand was sent from him, and this writing was inscribed.

The Writing Explained

25 “This is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEQEL, and PHARSIN.

26 This is the interpretation of the words: As for mene—God has numbered your kingdom’s days and brought it to an end.

27 As for teqel—you are weighed on the balances and found to be lacking.

28 As for peres—your kingdom is divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.”

29 Then, on Belshazzar’s orders, Daniel was clothed in purple, a golden collar was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed third ruler in the kingdom.

The Fall of Babylon

30 And in that very night Belshazzar, the Babylonian king, was killed.

31 So Darius the Mede took control of the kingdom when he was about sixty-two years old.

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

Daniel 6:1–2

1 It seemed like a good idea to Darius to appoint over the kingdom 120 satraps who would be in charge of the entire kingdom.

2 Over them would be three supervisors, one of whom was Daniel. These satraps were accountable to them, so that the king’s interests might not incur damage.

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

Daniel 6:3

3 Now this Daniel was distinguishing himself above the other supervisors and the satraps, for he had an extraordinary spirit. In fact, the king intended to appoint him over the entire kingdom.

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

Daniel 6:4–28

The Plot

4 Consequently the supervisors and satraps were trying to find some pretext against Daniel in connection with administrative matters. But they were unable to find any such damaging evidence, because he was trustworthy and guilty of no negligence or corruption.

5 So these men concluded, “We won’t find any pretext against this man Daniel unless it is in connection with the law of his God.”

6 So these supervisors and satraps came by collusion to the king and said to him, “O King Darius, live forever!

7 To all the supervisors of the kingdom, the prefects, satraps, counselors, and governors it seemed like a good idea for a royal edict to be issued and an interdict to be enforced. For the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human other than you, O king, should be thrown into a den of lions.

8 Now let the king issue a written interdict so that it cannot be altered, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed.

9 So King Darius issued the written interdict.

The Accusation and Condemnation of Daniel

10 When Daniel realized that a written decree had been issued, he entered his home, where the windows in his upper room opened toward Jerusalem. Three times daily he was kneeling and offering prayers and thanks to his God just as he had been accustomed to do previously.

11 Then those officials who had gone to the king came by collusion and found Daniel praying and asking for help before his God.

12 So they approached the king and said to him, “Did you not issue an edict to the effect that for the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human other than to you, O king, would be thrown into a den of lions?” The king replied, “That is correct, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be changed.”

13 Then they said to the king, “Daniel, who is one of the captives from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the edict that you issued. Three times daily he offers his prayer.”

14 When the king heard this, he was very upset and began thinking about how he might rescue Daniel. Until late afternoon he was struggling to find a way to rescue him.

15 Then those men came by collusion to the king and said to him, “Recall, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no edict or decree that the king issues can be changed.”

16 So the king gave the order, and Daniel was brought and thrown into a den of lions. The king consoled Daniel by saying, “Your God whom you continually serve will rescue you!”

17 Then a stone was brought and placed over the opening to the den. The king sealed it with his signet ring and with those of his nobles so that nothing could be changed with regard to Daniel.

18 Then the king departed to his palace. But he spent the night without eating, and no diversions were brought to him. He was unable to sleep.

The Deliverance of Daniel

19 In the morning, at the earliest sign of daylight, the king got up and rushed to the lions' den.

20 As he approached the den, he called out to Daniel in a worried voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, was your God whom you continually serve 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 closed the lions' mouths so that they have not harmed me, because I was found to be innocent before him. Nor have I done any harm to you, O king."

23 Then the king was delighted and gave an order to haul Daniel up from the den. So Daniel was hauled up out of the den. He had no injury of any kind, because he had trusted in his God.

The Accusers Killed and Daniel's God Honored

24 The king gave another order, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the lions' den—they, their children, and their wives. They did not even reach the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

25 Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and language groups who were living in all the land: "Peace and prosperity!

26 I have issued an edict that throughout all the dominion of my kingdom people are to revere and fear the God of Daniel. "For he is the living God; he endures forever. His kingdom will not be destroyed; his authority is forever.

27 He rescues and delivers and performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions!"

Daniel Prospers in the Medo-Persian Empire

28 So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign 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 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,

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

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.