

Daniel 5: Catastrophic Calligraphy

INTRODUCTION

The date was 12 October 539 BC. Many changes had taken place in the government of Babylon. The king of Babylon was Nabonidus. But he did not love the worship of Marduk. Marduk was the favorite god of the people of Babylon. Since the king didn't love their god, he had chosen to move to another place. Nabonidus had moved to Tema. Tema was a desert oasis. Here, Nabonidus could worship his favorite god, Sin. Sin was the name of the moon-god whom his mother had worshipped.

But things were not going very well for Nabonidus. When he left Babylon, he set up his son as a regent. A regent is a king who rules over an area. But this kind of king is underneath the power of the one great king who lives elsewhere. In the case of Nabonidus, his son, Belshazzar was made regent of Babylon. But Nabonidus was having big problems now. The power of the Medes and Persians had grown greatly. Cyrus, a Persian; and Darius, a Median, were attacking his kingdom. His forces finally had to surrender to the enemy at Sippar.

When news of his father's defeat reached Belshazzar, he didn't take it too seriously. He seemed to have every advantage on his side. The defeat happened at Sippar (80 km north of Babylon). Even though the enemy was close, Belshazzar felt safe enough. He lived in Babylon. Babylon was possibly the strongest city in the world at that time. The city had been strengthened repeatedly. By the time Belshazzar ruled, the city seemed like it could not be conquered.

The walls were tall and thick. They were so wide that two chariots could pass each other on the top. The city had large storehouses which were filled with food. The Euphrates River flowed through the city, providing needed water. If any army tried to besiege the city, there was little chance of defeating Babylon. This city seemed invincible. And so King Belshazzar was overconfident.

Please read Daniel 5:1

What a party. 1000 guests were involved. The king showed a total disregard for the serious threat just outside the gates. The enemy waited outside. But inside, people celebrated with no concern for the future. But this was more than a feast.

Read Daniel 5:2,3

The king was not satisfied with mere pleasure. He wanted to make a point.

He wanted to show his superiority over all others. He was not only the ruler of this city. He was not only stronger than the enemy. He was even stronger than the God of the Hebrews. Notice what they did with these special, golden vessels from the house of God.

Read Daniel 5:4

I can't imagine such lack of concern for the things of God. He had no fear of the enemy. He could have a party while they prepared to attack. He had no fear or respect for God. He could use items of worship for personal pleasure. And he praised his own gods as if they were more powerful than the true God. He mocked the true God. It was as if to say, "We are important enough to drink from vessels devoted to God."

But sometimes we do the same thing. What gods do we praise today? Money, job, personal skills? Friends, spouses, children? Knowledge, science, etc.? We know how to make our own gods. Then we praise the things or people that are important to us. The danger comes when this replaces God in our devotion.

Read Daniel 5:5,6

If I had seen such a thing I would have been scared half to death. Where did the hand come from? There was a bloodless hand writing words of doom. The king was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his face turned pale.

This reminds me of an experience which I had in Rome in 1984. I was in Rome with a group of people. We were part of a history study tour. After seeing some of the sights late one night, we began to walk back to our hotel. We stayed in a group because there was some danger in being out late at night in that part of town. As we walked back toward the hotel, I walked a bit ahead of the others. When they were not looking, I quietly stepped into a dark alley on the side. I hid behind a wall. I waited as a few people walked past. Then I suddenly stepped out in front of the next person from our group. I didn't know who it would be. I just came out after a random number of people passed by.

The next person was one of the young ladies in our group. She had no time to think. All that she knew was that it was dark, and a person had suddenly come out of the dark shadows in front of her. Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. She couldn't talk or scream. She was too frightened to make any sound. And then, when she realized that I was just part of her group, she calmed down some more. I felt sorry for scaring her that much. I only wanted to make a small joke. But it really scared her badly. And I'm sure that Belshazzar was even more frightened than this. When God causes men to fear, they cannot hide their fear.

Read Daniel 5:7

The king called for help. He couldn't understand the meaning of this writing. He offered great rewards. The one who could read and interpret the message would be made

the third ruler of the nation. His father was king, he was regent, and this person would be the third ruler.

Read Daniel 5:8,9

No one could read or interpret the writing. Yes, it was written in Aramaic. This was the trade language of their day. But this language was like Hebrew. It was usually written without the vowels. As you read Hebrew or Aramaic, you have to add the needed vowels in order to understand the meaning. Without the vowels, sometimes, several meanings are possible.

When I was studying Hebrew and Aramaic in Seminary, I had one very strict teacher. His name was Hans Erbes. He didn't only teach us to read regular Hebrew. In the Bible, little dots and lines have been added to the text. These dots and lines represent the vowel sounds. These vowels were not written in the original text. And so, our teacher made us learn how to read if those vowels were missing. Students were afraid of the teacher. It isn't easy to read a foreign language without the vowels. But this exercise helped us to understand the Bible better.

The Aramaic words on the wall were written without the vowel sounds. And several meanings were possible. As the king's wise men looked at the words they could not make out what was intended as the message. The words were written as a kind of pun. There were multiple possible meanings. And so the king needed help. Finally, help came from the queen. She was actually the queen mother. In Daniel 5:10-12 she reminded the king of the man Daniel. She told the king about what Daniel had done for Nebuchadnezzar. Notice what she said about Daniel in verse 11. The Spirit of the Holy God was in Daniel. "Elahin" can be translated, God, or gods. What a testimony. When people thought of Daniel, they thought of Daniel's God. I would like people to think about God when they think about me.

The good news was that Daniel could help. Sometimes we are too blind to remember where to turn for help. We need others to point us to the source. And Daniel pointed them to the source.

Daniel was brought to see the king. (see Daniel 5:13-16) The king briefly described the problem. He also mentioned what he had heard about Daniel. The king repeated his promise of a rich reward for the one who could read and interpret the message on the wall.

Read Daniel 5:17

Daniel was not interested in rewards. He was only interested in following the word of the LORD. Notice what Daniel left out. In Daniel 5:10, the queen mother was speaking. She followed the normal tradition for talking to a king. Her sentence began, "Oh King, live forever . . ." But Daniel didn't bother to use this introduction (verse 17).

Due to the nature of the message, it would not make sense to say that the king would live forever. The message was a message of doom.

Read Daniel 5:18

The most important thing for Daniel was to bring honor to the true God. He started his message with a little review of history. He reminded the king of what had happened to a previous king, Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel followed local custom and called Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar's father. This was a term for any male ancestor of a person. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar was Belshazzar's grandfather. Daniel repeated the fact that the God of heaven had given Nebuchadnezzar all of his wealth, power, and honor. (Daniel 5:19) He then briefly described what happened when Nebuchadnezzar took all of the glory for himself.

Read Daniel 5:20,21

That was the key point. Any king should keep in mind that the God of heaven is the true ruler of all mankind. Nebuchadnezzar had learned this the hard way. Belshazzar had the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the past. But he had chosen to live his own way. He had ignored the warnings of the past. He had sought to bring honor to himself. And now he had to see those terrible words on the wall.

Read Daniel 5:22,23

Here was the problem. The king knew what was right. He knew the dangers of taking all of the glory to himself. He had heard about what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar. But he chose to live his own way in spite of all these things. The king was bold against God (verse 23). Daniel's message was not a message of comfort. He brought words of rebuke. Before help could be offered, the problem had to be stated. And the same is true for us. Before God directs our future, He calls us to accountability.

The message of the next verses brought a chill of horror over the king. Those words written in burning letters upon the wall brought a message of doom. The king would have to die, and his kingdom would be conquered. And the message was written on the wall. This has become a kind of English idiom. "He saw the handwriting on the wall." We use this sentence about many different kinds of experiences. This describes a situation where something bad is going to happen. But before the bad thing happens, something reveals that the bad thing is on its way.

For example, imagine that you are speeding down the highway. The speed limit is 70 km/h. But you are driving 120 km/h. Suddenly, you look up and see a camera. You just saw the handwriting on the wall. Or perhaps, you didn't study hard enough for an exam. As you are trying to write the answers, you are really struggling. You can't remember the answer to one question. The person beside you seems to be doing very

well. You look over at her paper and copy the answer. Just as you finish writing it, you look up. The teacher is standing beside you with a grim expression on his face. You just saw the handwriting on the wall.

But for this king, it was more than an expression. It was real writing on the wall. And it was a message of doom for him.

The interesting thing is that the message was a kind of serious pun. A pun is a word that can have more than one meaning. And both meanings (or several meanings) are intended to be understood.

Read Daniel 5:24,25

This was a very short sentence. It contained only four words. In fact, there were only three different words. But each word carried multiple meanings.

מֵנֵא מֵנֵא תֵקֵל וּפְרָסִין (Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin).

See the following section on theological tools for an explanation of the multiple meanings.

THEOLOGICAL TOOLS

Notice what was happening to the vessels from the temple of God in Jerusalem. They had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:2). Now they were being used in a blasphemous way by Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar.¹

It is interesting to see the way that different people addressed the king. The queen mother (here called the queen) addressed her son with the typical greeting to a king, "Oh king, live forever. . ." (Daniel 5:10). But Daniel skipped this formality. Due to the nature of the message, it would seem strange to say that the king would live forever.² In fact, he would be dead in a few hours.

¹Though Daniel refers to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's father (Daniel 5:18), he is merely following an Eastern custom. Any male ancestor of a person can be called that person's father. Notice how Jesus was called the "Son of David" even though he was many generations removed from David (c.f. Matthew 9:27). In actual fact, the father of Belshazzar was Nabonidus.

²This was a typical greeting for a king in that part of the world (cf. Dan 2:4, 3:9; 5:10; and 6:6). I find it interesting that on one occasion Daniel also used this typical greeting when he addressed another king (Dan 6:21).

Belshazzar stated that the person who could interpret the writing would be made the THIRD RULER. This is an accurate portrayal what would happen. Belshazzar was already the second ruler. His father, Nabonidus, had moved from Babylon to Tema. He had set up his son, Belshazzar, as a co-regent. Nabonidus was still king, but he was far away. Belshazzar was the local king, or regent. In 1956, the Harran Stelae (plural) were found. They described the time when Nabonidus handed sarrutim (kingship) over to his firstborn son (this would be Belshazzar). Nabonidus remained in Tema for 10 years. As a result, the person next in the line of power after Belshazzar would be the "third ruler".

There are a number of parallels between the fall of Babylon to the Medes and Persians in Daniel 5 and the fall of end-time Babylon in Revelation 17. They can be charted as follows:

Daniel 5	Revelation 17
Belshazzar made his subjects drunk. (1)	End time Babylon makes the kings of the earth drunk (2)
Belshazzar induced his nobles and subjects to immorality (2,23) [only implied]	End time Babylon induces the kings of the earth to commit spiritual fornication (2)
Belshazzar and his guests drink from golden goblets (3)	Mystery Babylon drinks from the golden cup (4)
Judgment was pronounced upon ancient Babylon (26-28)	Judgment will be pronounced upon end time Babylon (1)
Belshazzar dishonored God in the worship of false gods (4, 23)	End time Babylon blasphemes God and challenges His authority (3)

A number of other points are possible to connect between ancient Babylon and the end time Babylon.³

Ancient Babylon persecuted God's people. (Daniel 1:1-4)	End time Babylon will persecute God's people. (Revelation 17:5, 6)
Ancient Babylon was built over the river Euphrates (Isaiah 44:27, 28)	End time Babylon will be built over the symbolic river Euphrates. (Revelation 16:12; 17: 6,15)
Ancient Babylon's power revolved around a mighty city. (Daniel 4:29-30)	End time Babylon's power will revolve around a mighty city. (Revelation 17:18).

³These points are taken from Michael Oxentencko, and Greg Weeks, *Daniel & Revelation Small Group Studies: Small Group Leader Materials* (Taylor, MI: Oakwood SDA Church, 1997).

Ancient Babylon was defeated by kings of the east--Darius and Cyrus. (Isaiah 45:1-5; Daniel 5:30; 6:28)	End time Babylon will be defeated by the heavenly kings of the east. (Revelation 16:12; cf. Matthew 24:27).
Ancient Babylon attacked God's Sanctuary and people. (Daniel 1:2).	End time Babylon will attack God's Sanctuary and people. (Revelation 13:6: 17:6).
Ancient Babylon fell in a single night. (Daniel 5:30-31)	End time Babylon will fall in a single hour. (Revelation 18:10,20)
Ancient Babylon mixed the treasures of God's sanctuary with pagan revelry. (Daniel 5:1-4)	End time Babylon mixes worship with paganism and spiritualism. (Revelation 18:2-3; 9:14, 20-21).
Ancient Babylon ruled the kings of the earth. (Daniel 2:37,38; 4:22)	End time Babylon will also control the kings of the earth. (Revelation 17:5,18).
Ancient Babylon fell when the river Euphrates was dried up. (Isaiah 44:27,28)	End time Babylon will fall when the symbolic river Euphrates dries up. (Revelation 16:12, 19).
Ancient Babylon fell because of God's prophetic word written by a bloodless hand. (Daniel 5:24-30)	End time Babylon will fall because of God's prophetic word as found in the books of Daniel and Revelation. (Daniel 12:4,7; Revelation 18:1,2; 14:8)

Read Daniel 5:24,25

This was a very short sentence. It contained only four words. In fact, there were only three different words. But each word carried multiple meanings.

מִנָּה מִנָּה תֵּקֵל וּפְרָסִין (Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin).

Before reading the next verses, I would like to explain a few things. Remember that Aramaic was written without the vowels. Later, vowels were added to the Bible so that we could understand better. These words could be a list of nouns. Or they could be a list of related verbs. Notice the serious pun:

מִנָּה [m^ene]: is Mina, a weight. (Hebrew: מָנֶה [maneh])

מְנָה [m^enah]: means to count. (Hebrew =)

תֵּקֵל [t^ekel]: is another weight. The Hebrew equivalent is שֶׁקֶל [shekel]. Even to this day, Shekels are a kind of money in Israel.

The verb תִּקַּל [t^eqal], means to weigh.

פְּרָם [p^eres], is a half-shekel (or some think that it was a half-mina). It was a smaller unit of weight. But the same consonants could spell a country name.

פָּרַס [paras] means Persia or Persians.

And the verb פָּרַס [p^eras] means to divide.

Now, with this in mind, let's read Daniel's explanation.

Read Daniel 5:26-28

If we look at the verbs, we could understand it like this:

מְנָה [m^enah], numbered.

תִּקַּל [t^ekal], weighed.

פָּרַס [p^eras], divided.

If we look at the nouns, we could understand it like this:

מִנָּה [m^ene]: quarters.

תִּקְלָה [t^ekel]: dimes.

פְּרָס [p^eres]: pennies.

Quarters, dimes, and pennies.

No wonder the wise men were confused about how to read this. It looked meaningless. But God revealed to Daniel the true meaning behind the pun.

We could look at this a couple of other ways in English. We can look at three prepositions and three words beginning with “f”:

מְנָה [m^enah], it's over (finished).

תִּקַּל [t^ekal], it's under (famished: found lacking).

פָּרַס [p^eras], its out (furnished: given).

This was the bad news. Belshazzar's rule was over (finished). His character had gone under (it was famished: found lacking). And he was on his way out, (his kingdom would be furnished to the Persians).

But this was also Good news. Rather than focusing on the doom of the king, we can see something much more positive. The king was evil. Whatever happened to him is the same thing that God will do with evil. Evil is over, under, out . . . Evil is finished, famished, and furnished.

Read Daniel 5:29,30

This was the end of the life and the rule of King Belshazzar. He was killed as the enemy conquered his city that night. As Dr. Leslie Pollard once said: "There lay the body of a king who knew, but would not do."⁴

What do you know? What are you doing? What are you not doing? Will it be good news or bad news when you hear, מֵנֵה מֵנֵה תֵּקֵל וּפְרָסִין (Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin)?

מֵנֵה תֵּקֵל פְּרָסִים [m^ene, t^ekel, p^eres]. Quarters, dimes, pennies.

מֵנֵה [m^enah], it's over (finished).

תֵּקֵל [t^ekal], it's under (famished: found lacking).

פְּרָסִים [p^eras], its out (furnished: given).

SPIRITUAL INSIGHT / PRACTICAL APPLICATION

On 12 October 539 B.C. Belshazzar was feasting in his palace while the armies of the Medes and Persians were about to break into his fortified city. What happened that night is one of the most exciting stories of the Bible. Two men would be found by the attacking army. Daniel would become a leader in the new government. The king would be killed.

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But this was also Good news. Rather than focusing on the doom of the king, we can see something much more positive. The king was evil. Whatever happened to him is the same thing that God will do with evil. Evil is over, under, out . . . Evil is finished, famished, and furnished.

Read Daniel 5:29,30

This was the end of the life and the rule of King Belshazzar. He was killed as the enemy conquered his city that night. As noted above, Dr. Leslie Pollard summarized the story like this. While the armies of the Medes and Persians swarmed through the banquet hall, they killed people left and right. The king was cut down by one of the soldiers.

⁴This comes from a sermon which is cited once more in this section of the syllabus. It was preached at the Andrews University Theological Seminary some time around 1991.

⁵See the section on theological tools for an explanation of these prepositions, etc.

Before the night was over, there lay the body of a "king who KNEW, but would not DO." Knowing what is right is not enough. We must also do what is right.

What do you know? What are you doing? What are you not doing? Will it be good news or bad news when you hear, מְנֵה מְנֵה תִּקְל וּפְרָסִין (Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin)?

מְנֵה תִּקְל פְּרָס [m^ene, t^ekel, p^eres]. Quarters, dimes, pennies. W500, W100, W50.

מְנֵה [m^enah], it's over (finished).

תִּקְל [t^ekal], it's under (famished: found lacking).

פְּרָס [p^eras], its out (furnished: given).

When God speaks, is it the end for you? Or is it the end for your problems? By God's grace, you, like Daniel, can be left standing beside the body of the king who knew, but wouldn't do.