

# A Drunken King's Message

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*Daniel 5:1-12*

## **TEXT: (English Standard Version)**

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand.

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

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. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. 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.' Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed.

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

## **NOTES:**

- A. Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords.
  1. After he tasted the wine, he ordered the vessels of gold & silver be brought from the temple.
    - a. Notice that it's only after Belshazzar begins drinking that he acts in such a bold manner.
    - b. Surely, there is a lesson here about the effects of alcohol.
  2. Because he was drunk, Belshazzar made a very unwise decision—using the vessels intended for the worship of God for his own drunken pleasure.
  3. Alcohol is quite dangerous.
    - a. "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (Prov 20:1).
    - b. "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. 'They struck me,' you will say, 'but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink'" (Prov 23:29-35).
- B. In his drunkenness, Belshazzar brings the sacred vessels from God's temple to use in toasting his pagan idols.
  1. In antiquity, people generally respected their own gods as well as the gods of others.
    - a. After destroying a conquered people's temples, they would often erect new temples.
    - b. But, Belshazzar here acts here in pure defiance.
  2. Belshazzar knew precisely what he was doing.
    - a. Nebuchadnezzar "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" (5:21-23).
    - b. It's not that Belshazzar acted in ignorance, but he knew precisely what he was doing.
- C. A king's wives & concubines were normally not permitted at banquets. The fact that these women are here likely shows the debauchery of Belshazzar.
- D. As the party got going, a human hand appeared & wrote on the plaster of the palace.

1. Archeology has discovered that, in fact, the walls of the Babylonian kingdom were covered in plaster.
  2. The text says that the hand was “a human hand.” Since the hand was clearly supernatural, why would the text refer to it as “a human hand”?
- E. The king yelled for the enchanters to come to his aid.
1. “Called loudly” (ESV) is literally “with excessive loudness.”
  2. Why would the king yell “with excessive loudness” for his enchanters to come?
- F. Belshazzar quickly promises that whoever interprets the writing would “be the third ruler in the kingdom.”
1. It isn’t exactly clear what is meant by this.
  2. It could be that he was offering the third position in the Triumvirate (Nabonidus, Belshazzar, whoever interpreted the dream).
  3. Others say that this means that he would be made a high officer in the kingdom.
- G. The king’s wise men began to be assembled before him.
1. The original makes clear that the wise men did not all come at one, but they came in one by one until they were all assembled.
    - a. Can you imagine the frustration that Belshazzar must have been feeling at this point?
    - b. The wise men keep coming, but there isn’t a one of them who can interpret the handwriting.
  2. At this point, the queen came & informed Belshazzar of Daniel.
    - a. The ESV has a footnote that the word “queen” can be translated “queen mother.”
    - b. That is undoubtedly the idea here—Remember that the king’s wives are at the feast.
  3. She certainly seems to have been Nebuchadnezzar’s widow, for she knew a great deal about the events concerning Nebuchadnezzar & Daniel. Queen mothers held very prominent positions in ancient Oriental courts.
- H. It could very well be that the queen mother had heard of how hysterical her son (or step-son) had become & came to bring him to his senses, since the Medes & Persians were camping right outside the city. The queen mother speaks to Belshazzar as if he should have remember Daniel.