TRACK FIVE

Deep Dive

A closer study of Daniel 5 for teachers, preachers, and anyone who wants to dig in: history, language, structure, interpretation, and Christ.

How to read this section. Statements of fact are drawn from the biblical text or from well-established historical sources. Where scholars disagree, the major views held by orthodox Christian interpreters are set side by side and labeled. Scripture is quoted from the World English Bible (WEB). Aramaic words are given in Hebrew script with a simple transliteration.

1. Historical and Cultural Background

BABYLON'S LAST KING, AND HIS SON

After Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC, Babylon had three short-lived kings before Nabonidus took the throne in 556 BC. Nabonidus was not Nebuchadnezzar's son. For long periods he lived far from Babylon at the oasis of Tema (Tayma) in Arabia. For his seventh, ninth, tenth, and eleventh years, the Nabonidus Chronicle records that the king was in Tayma "while the prince, his officers, (and) his army (were) in Akkad," and that the New Year (Akitu) festival did not take place.[1]

That prince was Belshazzar (Akkadian *Bēl-šar-uṣur*, "Bel, protect the king"). For centuries he was unknown outside the Bible, and nineteenth-century critics doubted he had existed. Then cuneiform texts turned up. A cylinder from Ur records Nabonidus praying for "Belshazzar, the eldest son, my offspring." A text known as the Verse Account says Nabonidus "entrusted the kingship" to him. Legal documents from the period even record oaths sworn by both Nabonidus and Belshazzar.[2] This fits Daniel 5 closely. Belshazzar functioned as king in Babylon, yet he was second to his father, which may explain why the honor he offered was to be "the third ruler in the kingdom" (5:7, 16, 29): the two highest places were already filled. *(A widely held explanation.)*

"NEBUCHADNEZZAR HIS FATHER"

Daniel 5 repeatedly calls Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar's "father" (5:2, 11, 13, 18). Babylonian sources make Nabonidus his father. In Semitic usage, "father" (Aramaic *'ab*) can mean ancestor or predecessor as well as parent. Some suggest a family connection through Belshazzar's mother, but that is unproven. *(The relationship is a matter of interpretation; the text's point is that Belshazzar stood in Nebuchadnezzar's line as king and knew his story.)*

WHERE DANIEL 5 FALLS IN TIME

Daniel 7 and 8 are dated to "the first year" and "the third year" of Belshazzar (7:1; 8:1), so those visions come before the events of chapter 5, even though they appear later in the book. Daniel had been taken to Babylon around 605 BC (1:1), so by 539 BC he had been in exile about 66 years. If he was a teenager when taken, he was in his eighties. *(This is an estimate; the Bible gives no age.)*

THE FALL OF BABYLON

The Nabonidus Chronicle reports that Cyrus defeated the Babylonian army at Opis, that Sippar "was captured without a battle," and that on the sixteenth day of the month Tashritu (in October 539 BC) "Ugbaru, governor of Gutium, and the army of Cyrus, without battle... entered Babylon." Cyrus himself entered the city about two weeks later.[1] Two Greek historians writing later, Herodotus (*Histories* 1.191) and Xenophon (*Cyropaedia* 7.5), say the Persians lowered the Euphrates and entered along the riverbed while the city was celebrating a festival. Their accounts are later and differ in details. They fit Daniel's picture of a feast on the night the kingdom fell, but they don't independently confirm Belshazzar's banquet or the writing on the wall. Babylonian sources do not record Belshazzar's death. Daniel 5:30 is our only explicit statement of it.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHAPTER

Like Daniel 3, this chapter belongs to the Aramaic section of the book (2:4b-7:28). Aramaic was the international language of the empire, and fittingly, the writing on the wall itself is in Aramaic.

2. Literary Structure

DANIEL 5 WITHIN DANIEL 2-7

In the mirror pattern of the Aramaic chapters (see Adrien Lenglet's 1972 study),[3] Daniel 5 is paired with Daniel 4:

A	DANIEL 2	Four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God
B	DANIEL 3	Faithful servants delivered from the furnace
C	DANIEL 4	A proud king humbled, and restored
C′	DANIEL 5	**A proud king weighed, and judged**
B′	DANIEL 6	A faithful servant delivered from the lions
A′	DANIEL 7	Four kingdoms, and the kingdom of God

The pairing is the key to the chapter. Daniel himself sets the two kings side by side (5:18-23). Both are proud and both are confronted, but one humbles himself and is restored, and the other doesn't and is removed.

THE SHAPE OF CHAPTER 5

5:1-4	The feast and the sacrilege
5:5-9	The hand, the writing, and the helpless wise men
5:10-12	The queen remembers Daniel
5:13-16	The king's offer
5:17-24	Daniel's sermon: the story Belshazzar knew
5:25-28	The writing read and interpreted
5:29-31	Daniel honored; that night the king is slain

3. Commentary

5:1-4, THE FEAST AND THE SACRILEGE. A banquet for a thousand lords was a display of royal confidence. The phrase "while he tasted the wine" (5:2) places the order during the feast's wine-drinking; the text does not say whether he was intoxicated. The gold and silver vessels from the Jerusalem temple (1:2) had been placed in "the treasure house of his god" (1:2), probably as trophies of victory. Bringing them out to drink from while praising "the gods of gold, and of silver, of bronze, of iron, of wood, and of stone" (5:4) was an act of contempt toward Israel's God, probably meant to say that Babylon's gods had defeated Him. *(An interpretation; the text doesn't record the revelers' reasoning.)* Daniel later names it plainly: "...have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven..." (5:23).

5:5-9, THE HAND AND THE WRITING. "In the same hour" the fingers of a man's hand write on the plaster "near the lamp stand" (5:5). The king's reaction is described physically: his face changed, his thoughts troubled him, "the joints of his thighs were loosened," and his knees struck one against another (5:6). He summons enchanters, Chaldeans, and soothsayers and offers purple (the royal color), a gold chain, and the third place in the kingdom (5:7). But "they could not read the writing" (5:8). Babylon's wisdom fails, as it did in Daniel 2 and 4.

5:10-12, THE QUEEN. The queen enters the banquet hall from outside, which suggests she is not one of the wives already present (5:2-3). Many commentators conclude she was the queen mother. *(Her identity is not given.)* She speaks with authority and remembers what the king has forgotten or ignored. She describes Daniel as one "in whom is the spirit of the holy gods" (5:11), the same phrase Nebuchadnezzar used (4:8-9), and she recalls his promotion under Nebuchadnezzar.

5:13-16, THE KING'S OFFER. Belshazzar speaks of Daniel by reputation: "I have heard of you..." (5:14, 16). His question, "Are you that Daniel of the children of the captivity of Judah...?" (5:13), may carry a note of condescension. *(An interpretation.)* He repeats the offer of purple, gold, and power.

5:17-24, DANIEL'S SERMON. Daniel declines the gifts (5:17), not out of rudeness but to make clear he cannot be bought. Afterward Belshazzar orders the honors given anyway (5:29), when they can no longer affect Daniel's message. Before he reads the writing, he preaches. He reminds Belshazzar that "the Most High God" gave Nebuchadnezzar his kingdom (5:18), that Nebuchadnezzar's pride brought him down "until he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men" (5:21), and then he makes the charge: "You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this..." (5:22). The indictment has three parts: he exalted himself against the Lord of heaven, he profaned God's vessels, and he praised lifeless idols while not glorifying "the God in whose hand your breath is, and whose are all your ways" (5:23).

5:25-28, THE WRITING READ. "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN" (5:25). Daniel interprets three words as verbs describing what God has done (5:26-28). *Mene*: God has counted (or numbered) your kingdom and brought it to an end. *Tekel*: you are weighed in the balances and found wanting. *Peres*: your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians. In 5:28 Daniel uses the singular *pĕrēs*, and it echoes *pārās*, "Persia." On what the words meant on their own, see section 5.

5:29-31, THAT NIGHT. Belshazzar keeps his word, and Daniel is clothed in purple and proclaimed third ruler (5:29). The text adds no comment, only the next sentence: "In that night Belshazzar the Chaldean King was slain." (5:30) The kingdom that had seemed eternal falls in a single night, and "Darius the Mede received the kingdom..." (5:31). The honors Daniel received lasted only hours, but Daniel himself would prosper under the new regime (6:1-3, 28).

4. Key Words

WORD	TRANSLITERATION	MEANING AND USE
כְּתָבָא	*kĕtābā'*	"the writing" (5:7-8, 15-17, 24-25)
מְנֵא	*mĕnē'*	Related to the verb *mĕnâ*, "to count, number." Also a known word for the weight called a *mina*.
תְּקֵל	*tĕqēl*	Related to the verb *tĕqal*, "to weigh." Also the Aramaic form of *shekel*, a smaller weight.
פְּרֵס / וּפַרְסִין	*pĕrēs / ûparsîn*	Related to *pĕras*, "to divide." Also a word for a half-weight (probably a half-mina). *ûparsîn* = "and" + plural. A wordplay on *pārās*, "Persia" (5:28).
מֹאזְנָיָא	*mō'zanyā'*	"the balances, scales" (5:27)
חַסִיר	*ḥassîr*	"lacking, deficient," "found wanting" (5:27)
נִשְׁמְתָךְ	*nišmĕtāk*	"your breath" (5:23). Compare Hebrew *nĕšāmâ*, the breath of life God breathed into Adam (Genesis 2:7).
הַשְׁפֵּלְתְּ	*hašpēlt*	"you have humbled" (from *šĕpal*, "to be low"). In 5:22 it is negated: "you have not humbled your heart." The same root describes God humbling Nebuchadnezzar (4:37; 5:19).

5. Interpretive Questions

WHAT DID MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN MEAN?

In 1886 the French scholar Charles Clermont-Ganneau proposed that the words are names of weights: a *mina*, a *shekel*, and *parsin*, half-weights.[4] Aramaic documents found since then have confirmed that these were common weight terms, and this background is now widely accepted.[5] On this reading, the wise men may have been able to sound out the words but could not see what a list of weights meant. Daniel, by God's wisdom, reads them as verbs from the same roots: counted, weighed, divided.

- **Why is *mene* written twice?** Some take the first *mene* as a verb ("it has been counted") introducing the list. Others see emphasis or the certainty of the decree (compare the doubling in Genesis 41:32). The text does not explain it.
- **Do the weights stand for particular kings?** Some interpreters, ancient and modern, have matched the weights to Babylon's kings. These proposals are speculative.

WHY COULDN'T THE WISE MEN READ IT?

The text says only that they "could not read the writing" or interpret it (5:8). Suggestions include: the words were written in consonants only and could be read several ways, the script was unfamiliar, or God withheld understanding from them. *(All are interpretations.)* The narrative's point is clear either way. Daniel succeeds where Babylon's experts fail, and the book credits such wisdom to God (compare 2:27-28).

WHO WAS DARIUS THE MEDE? (5:31)

No "Darius the Mede" appears by that name in surviving extra-biblical sources, and conservative scholars have proposed several identifications:

- **Gubaru,** a governor under Cyrus (argued by John C. Whitcomb, *Darius the Mede*, 1959). Whitcomb distinguished him from Ugbaru, the general the Nabonidus Chronicle says entered Babylon. How the name forms and individuals relate is still debated.
- **Cyrus himself,** reading Daniel 6:28 as "Darius, that is, Cyrus the Persian" (argued by D. J. Wiseman, 1965).
- **Cyaxares II,** a Median ruler who appears in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (his existence is debated).

> Many critical scholars instead regard Darius the Mede as a literary figure. The text itself simply records that he "received the kingdom" (5:31), echoing the sovereignty theme: God gives kingdoms to whomever He will (5:21).

6. Cross-References

- **Daniel 4**: the companion chapter. Read it first.
- **Proverbs 16:18**: "Pride goes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall." (WEB)
- **Proverbs 21:2; 1 Samuel 16:7**: God weighs hearts, not appearances.
- **Psalm 62:9**: in the balances, all people are "lighter than a breath."
- **Isaiah 21:9**: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the engraved images of her gods are broken to the ground." (WEB)
- **Jeremiah 51:39, 57**: God's word against Babylon pictures her princes and wise men made drunk at a feast, falling into "a perpetual sleep".
- **Ezra 1:7-11**: Cyrus returns the temple vessels to Jerusalem.
- **Luke 12:16-21**: "tonight your soul is required of you."
- **Luke 18:9-14**: the proud Pharisee and the humble tax collector.
- **Revelation 18:10**: the fall of "Babylon, the strong city!" in "one hour."

7. How Daniel 5 Points to Christ

Weighed and found wanting, all of us. Belshazzar's verdict invites a wider Christian reflection: "...all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God..." (Romans 3:23, WEB). *(A theological application; Daniel 5 itself pronounces judgment on one king.)* Daniel 5 pushes us to ask how anyone could pass such a weighing.

The King who humbled Himself. Belshazzar exalted himself against the Lord of heaven. Jesus, "existing in the form of God," emptied Himself and "humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:6-8, WEB). In Him the scales are answered: "him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, WEB).

Two feasts, two cups. (A theological reflection, not a claim that the text predicts it.) Belshazzar lifted the temple's cups in pride and drank to idols. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took a cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20, WEB) One feast ended in judgment that very night. The other offers mercy to everyone who humbly receives it.

The God in whose hand our breath is. Daniel's words to Belshazzar are a warning and an invitation. The same God who numbers kingdoms holds every breath. While we have breath, the call stands: "Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2, WEB)

8. For Further Study

COMMENTARIES (ACCESSIBLE) - DALE RALPH DAVIS, *THE MESSAGE OF DANIEL*, THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY (IVP, 2013). - IAIN M. DUGUID, *DANIEL*, REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY (P&R, 2008). - TREMPER LONGMAN III, *DANIEL*, NIV APPLICATION COMMENTARY (ZONDERVAN, 1999). - JOYCE G. BALDWIN, *DANIEL*, TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES (IVP, 1978).

COMMENTARIES (ADVANCED) - STEPHEN R. MILLER, *DANIEL*, NEW AMERICAN COMMENTARY 18 (B&H, 1994). - ERNEST C. LUCAS, *DANIEL*, APOLLOS OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARY 20 (APOLLOS, 2002). - JOHN E. GOLDINGAY, *DANIEL*, WORD BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 30 (WORD, 1989; REV. ED. ZONDERVAN, 2019).

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND - ALAN R. MILLARD, "DANIEL AND BELSHAZZAR IN HISTORY," *BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY REVIEW* 11:3 (MAY/JUNE 1985): 72-78. - A. K. GRAYSON, *ASSYRIAN AND BABYLONIAN CHRONICLES* (J. J. AUGUSTIN, 1975), CHRONICLE 7, THE NABONIDUS CHRONICLE. ENGLISH TRANSLATION ONLINE AT LIVIUS.ORG ("ABC 7"). - D. J. WISEMAN ET AL., *NOTES ON SOME PROBLEMS IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL* (TYNDALE PRESS, 1965). - JOHN C. WHITCOMB, *DARIUS THE MEDE* (EERDMANS, 1959). - HERODOTUS, *HISTORIES* 1.191; XENOPHON, *CYROPAEDIA* 7.5. - ADRIEN LENGLET, "LA STRUCTURE LITTÉRAIRE DE DANIEL 2-7," *BIBLICA* 53 (1972): 169-90.

NOTES

1. Nabonidus Chronicle (ABC 7), col. ii, lines 5, 10, 19, 23, and col. iii, lines 12-18. Translation from Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, as published at Livius.org.
2. These documents are summarized in Millard, "Daniel and Belshazzar in History," *BAR* 11:3 (1985). Nabonidus's regnal dates are 556-539 BC (some sources give 555).
3. Lenglet, *Biblica* 53 (1972): 169-90; see also J. Paul Tanner, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Daniel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (2003).
4. Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, *Journal asiatique*, 8th series, vol. 8 (1886), as summarized in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin."
5. Some scholars identify *peres* as a half-shekel instead of a half-mina. If *peres* means half a mina, it is heavier than a shekel; if half a shekel, lighter. The precise weight is debated.

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