

**Reformation Fellowship Notes • May 31, 2020**  
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**Handout #7**  
**Daniel 5**

**I. Introduction**

A. Questions from last week

1. [C:] What other possible ways can we respond when we have done something well? It's pretty clear Yahweh is not a fan of King Nebuchadnezzar's initial response as Nebuchadnezzar surveys his kingdom and praises himself. What response would a godly Nebuchadnezzar have? Ignore his accomplishments? Acknowledge them and praise God? Not acknowledge them and still praise God? There may be other options I haven't thought of.
  - a) Nebuchadnezzar's response was not just a weak moment but rather a response representative of what was in his soul.
    - (1) God is not just looking for slip-ups.
  - b) Humility is *the* most important quality we can have.
    - (1) Humility vis-à-vis God
      - (a) God is the Creator, and we are his creatures.
  - c) As sinful human, beings our tendency is to see what we do as an extension of my essence.
    - (1) An achievement of my inherent, autonomous powers
  - d) Humility recognizes that we are inherently powerful.
    - (1) All of our powers are granted by God.
    - (2) Those powers ought to be used in submission to God.
2. [K:] I keep wondering about the word Empire and whether to think about it in terms of an individual person such as Nebuchadnezzar or whether to think of it more in terms of a collective group of people in progressive stages of organization. Maybe it's both. However, in both visions, Nebuchadnezzar the individual man is specifically identified as the head of gold and the large tree. I'm not sure how to think about Babylon as a nation or empire in the dreams. Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar as the supreme leader represents the collective Empire as well as the individual man leading the Empire? As God deals with Nebuchadnezzar, so he will deal with man's efforts to organize societies toward Babel-like empires?
  - a) The text itself does not make a clear separation of Empire from emperor.
    - (1) Can we make sense of this?
      - (a) No one has a greater influence on an empire than the emperor.
        - (i) The empire more or less embodies the character of the emperor.
      - (b) However, no empire is a faithful expression of the emperor.
        - (i) We will see an example of this in chapter 6.
    - (2) To a certain extent, emperors are victims of Empire just like everyone else.
      - (a) So God deals with them as individuals.

## B. Historical background to chapter 5

1. Knowing some of the history will help fill out our understanding of the chapter.
2. Some have questioned the historicity of this passage.
  - a) But our knowledge of the time has improved.
  - b) Some questions remain, but it appears to be historically accurate.
3. What happened after the death of Nebuchadnezzar
  - a) His successors were all very unimpressive.
    - (1) He was succeeded by his son Amel-Marduk (Evil-merodoch) (562-560).
    - (2) His brother-in-law, Neriglissar, killed him and took power.
      - (a) Reigned from 560-556
    - (3) Neriglissar's son, Labashi-Marduk, reigned after him for only a few months.
      - (a) He was killed as part of a coup.
    - (4) Nabonidus became king (556-539).
      - (a) He was a renaissance man.
      - (b) A very pious king
        - (i) But his devotion to the moon god caused the priests of Marduk to be alienated.
      - (c) After three years, Nabonidus went to Tema.
        - (i) He stayed there until just before the end of the Empire.
    - (5) Belshazzar ruled in Babylon while Nabonidus was in Tema.
      - (a) New Year was not celebrated while Nabonidus was gone.
        - (i) Only the king could lead the celebration of New Year.
      - (b) The mother of Belshazzar, Nitocris, was apparently the daughter of Nebuchadnezzar.
        - (i) She was very popular and highly respected.
      - (c) Belshazzar appears to have been the key instigator of the coup that brought his father to the throne.
        - (i) Motives were largely financial.
        - (ii) When he ruled in Babylon, he and his friends benefitted financially.
  4. The conquest of Babylon by the Persians
    - a) The Medes had been allies of the Babylonians when they fought against the Assyrians.
      - (1) Nebuchadnezzar married the daughter of the king of Media.
      - (2) The Babylonians had become estranged from the Medes by the time of Nabonidus.
      - (3) The Medes became closely allied with the Persians.
    - b) Cyrus led Medes and Persians to become a major power.
      - (1) He became king of Persia, succeeding his father in 559.
      - (2) Incorporated Medes in 549
      - (3) Conquered Lydia in 546
      - (4) Started marching toward Babylon

- (5) Nabonidus tried to stop Cyrus in Sippar.
  - (a) Nabonidus and the army were routed, and he had to flee.
- 5. What was happening at the time of the feast described in chapter 5?
  - a) The main Babylonian army, led by Nabonidus, had been defeated by the Persians.
    - (1) Nabonidus was hiding out in one of the cities not far from Babylon.
  - b) Belshazzar is ensconced in Babylon, which was thought to be impregnable.

## II. Daniel 5:1-4

*King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. <sup>2</sup> While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. <sup>3</sup> So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. <sup>4</sup> As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.*

### A. Belshazzar held a great feast.

1. He gathered 1000 of his nobles to feast with him.
2. They had to have known that the Persians were approaching Babylon.
  - a) They may have felt that they were secure.
    - (1) Surrounded by multiple city walls
  - b) They may have chosen to celebrate in the face of the danger.
    - (1) Show their confidence in their security despite the threat
3. They drank wine.
  - a) They were probably tipsy, if not drunk.
4. Belshazzar called for the temple vessels.
  - a) Hezekiah had shown the vessels to the Babylonian representatives.
  - b) They were taken to Babylon when the temple was destroyed in 605.
5. Why did he call for these particular vessels?
  - a) Pure happenstance; he could have asked for the vessels from the temples of any of the other gods—but it is pointed out because it shows the disrespect he had for YHWH.
  - b) Antisemitism
  - c) They were the vessels of the one God who required exclusive worship.
    - (1) YHWH would have been the only god without an idol.
      - (a) They were praising the idols.
6. They honored the various idols.
  - a) All the idols of Babylon had been brought to Nabonidus to Babylon for protection.

The events connected with the downfall of the empire in the seventeenth year are better known, since the entry of the chronicle for this year is almost entirely preserved. The New Year's festival was celebrated, and offerings given to all the temples of the kingdom. The next event reported is the gathering of the divine statues of the sanctuaries of Babylonia in the capital. . . .

If this reconstruction is correct, it would mean that Nabonidus expected a Persian invasion and was making preparations accordingly several months before the clash of arms at Opis.

Clearly Nabonidus wanted to prevent the statues from falling into the hands of the enemy. Carrying off divine images was a common punishment imposed on vanquished peoples in the ancient Near East (see Cogan 1974), and it seems reasonable to assume that Nabonidus was trying to ensure the loyalty of all Babylonian cities by sheltering their main gods in the capital, which could endure a long siege. (Beaulieu, p. 220-3)

- b) So at the feast, they were honoring all the idols of Babylon and dishonoring the one true God

### III. Daniel 5:5-9

*Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. <sup>6</sup> His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.*

*<sup>7</sup> The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."*

*<sup>8</sup> Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. <sup>9</sup> So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.*

- A. God condescended to communicate with the Babylonian nobles.
  - 1. A human hand
  - 2. Writing known words
  - 3. On the wall opposite the lampstand
  - 4. The hand disappeared, but the writing remained.
- B. Belshazzar saw the hand.
  - 1. He was shaken by seeing it.
  - 2. Physically affected
- C. Belshazzar called for the Chaldeans to interpret it.
  - 1. He offered wealth and power in exchange for interpretation.
    - a) Made third in power
      - (1) After Nabonidus and Belshazzar
  - 2. They were unable to read or interpret the inscription.

- a) This made Belshazzar and the nobles even more alarmed.

#### IV. Daniel 5:10-12

*The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. “O king, live forever!” she said. “Don’t be alarmed! Don’t look so pale! <sup>11</sup> There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father—your father the king, I say—appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. <sup>12</sup> This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means.”*

- A. Belshazzar’s mother got wind of the hubbub in the palace.
1. She was Nebuchadnezzar’s daughter.
  2. To barge in like this shows she is of stature and that this is an unusual situation.
  3. She reassured Belshazzar that this mystery could be solved.
    - a) There is a man in Babylon who can interpret this.
      - (1) He has a spirit of the holy gods.
      - (2) Nebuchadnezzar found him to be wise and insightful.
        - (a) The wisdom of the gods is in him.
      - (3) Nebuchadnezzar made him chief of the Chaldeans.
        - (a) Because he could interpret such things
      - (4) This man is Daniel.
        - (a) Call him and he will interpret it.

#### V. Daniel 5:13-16

*So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, “Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? <sup>14</sup> I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. <sup>15</sup> The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. <sup>16</sup> Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom.”*

- A. Daniel must be in retirement.
1. Belshazzar does not appear to know Daniel personally.
  2. Daniel is not in active, high ranking, service.
- B. Daniel appeared before the king.
1. Are you the Daniel who Nebuchadnezzar brought from Judah?
    - a) Daniel’s lowliness is being underscored.
      - (1) He is a conquered Jew.

- b) And yet he has the spirit of the gods in him.
- c) The wise men were unable to decipher the writing.
- d) If he can do it, he will be handsomely rewarded.

## VI. Daniel 5:17-21

*Then Daniel answered the king, “You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.*

*<sup>18</sup> “O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. <sup>19</sup> Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. <sup>20</sup> But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. <sup>21</sup> He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.*

- A. Daniel turns down the reward but agrees to interpret the writing.
- B. Daniel recounts the events surrounding Nebuchadnezzar’s madness.
  - 1. God gave Nebuchadnezzar great power and majesty.
  - 2. People all over the world feared him.
    - a) He had the power of life and death over all the people in his realm.
  - 3. But he became arrogant.
    - a) His power and majesty were removed.
    - b) He was driven out of human society.
    - c) He lived like a beast.
    - d) This continued until he became humbled before God.
      - (1) God controls who rules and who does not.

## VII. Daniel 5:22-24

*“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. <sup>23</sup> Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.*

*<sup>24</sup> Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.*

- A. Belshazzar did not learn from his grandfather’s experience.
  - 1. Even though he knew the history of what had happened.
  - 2. You exalted yourself over the Sovereign God.
    - a) You even drank from his holy vessels.
    - b) You praised your idols instead of God.
      - (1) They can’t see or understand.

- (2) And yet you dismiss the God who is sovereign over you.
  - (a) Your very life is in his hand.
- c) So God sent that hand to write a message for you.

### VIII. Daniel 5:25-29

*“This is the inscription that was written:*

*MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN*

<sup>26</sup> *“This is what these words mean:*

*Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.*

<sup>27</sup> *Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.*

<sup>28</sup> *Peres: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”*

<sup>29</sup> *Then at Belshazzar’s command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.*

- A. The message was *MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN*.
  - 1. Aramaic words
  - 2. All denote measures of weight.
    - a) Somewhat like “Pound, pound, ounce, quarter”
    - b) No clear meaning, just something to do with value
  - 3. But Daniel interprets the message using alternative meanings of each word (like puns).
    - a) “Counted, weighed, and divided”
    - b) The last word also sounds like the word for Persians.
    - c) Daniel used less likely meanings for each word and was able to put them into a meaningful sentence.
  - 4. It was a prediction that because the Babylonian empire was found wanting, it was going to be given over to the Persians.
- B. Daniel was immediately given his reward and made third in the kingdom.
  - 1. This was a rather futile exercise if the kingdom’s demise was immanent
  - 2. I don’t know why Daniel accepted this
- C. Other than this, we have no indication of how Belshazzar responded,
  - 1. I suspect he did not take it seriously,
- D. There is not a word about the reaction of the 1000 nobles.

### IX. Daniel 5:30-31

<sup>30</sup> *That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, <sup>31</sup> and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.*

- A. Belshazzar was killed that same night when the Persians took control of Babylon.
  - 1. We can use information from the Greek historian Xenophon to fill in what happened.
    - a) The Persian army, under Gobryas, conquered Babylon without a fight.
      - (1) Gobryas was a Babylonian official who went over to the Persians.
        - (a) Belshazzar had had his son killed.
        - (2) Gobryas took control of Babylon.
          - (a) He had Belshazzar killed.
  - 2. The Babylonians celebrated the Persians' conquest.
    - a) But the celebration cut short when Nitocris died.
  - 3. The population mourned for several days.
- B. At the age of 62, Darius the Mede took control of Babylon (539 BC).
  - 1. He was the one who issued the decree that the Jews were to be allowed to return to Jerusalem.
    - a) The vessels were returned to Jerusalem shortly after Babylon fell.

## X. Conclusion

- A. Belshazzar gets treated differently from Nebuchadnezzar.
  - 1. Daniel does not show any affection for him.
  - 2. Belshazzar does not get three chances like Nebuchadnezzar got.
    - a) He was expected to learn from the experience of his grandfather.
  - 3. Nebuchadnezzar had a tender heart.
    - a) Inscriptions in Babylon dating to the time of Nebuchadnezzar show that he was very interested in justice.

[Nebuchadnezzar says,] "The strong used to plunder the weak who was not equal to a lawsuit. The rich used to take the property of the poor. Regent and prince would not take the part of the cripple and widow before the judge, and if they came before the judge he would not preside over their case. Even if the judge took a bribe or present, he would pay no attention to it (the case); if they did not accept any decision from him. . . ." In contrast, Nebuchadnezzar claims that "he was not negligent in the matter of true and righteous judgment; he did not rest night or day. But with counsel and deliberation he persisted in writing down judgment and decisions arranged to be pleasing to the great lord Marduk and for the betterment of all the peoples and the settling of the land for the betterment of all the peoples and the settling of the land of Babylonia (Akkad). He drew up improved regulations for the city and rebuilt the law-courts. . . ." (Wiseman, p. 100)

- b) There is no indication that Belshazzar shared this interest.
- 4. God went to great lengths to bring Nebuchadnezzar along because he had a tenderness.



- a) Even though it was a brutal process
- 5. God did not do the same the Belshazzar.
  - a) He was an arrogant fool who was only interested in himself.
- B. The vessels represent God's presence.
  - 1. God was with his people in exile.
  - 2. God was abused by Belshazzar along with his people.
  - 3. Within a year of this event, the vessels went back to Jerusalem.
    - a) Isaiah 52:7-12:

<sup>7</sup> *How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring good news,  
who proclaim peace,  
who bring good tidings,  
who proclaim salvation,  
who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*

<sup>8</sup> *Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;  
together they shout for joy.  
When the LORD returns to Zion,  
they will see it with their own eyes.*

<sup>9</sup> *Burst into songs of joy together,  
you ruins of Jerusalem,  
for the LORD has comforted his people,  
he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

<sup>10</sup> *The LORD will lay bare his holy arm  
in the sight of all the nations,  
and all the ends of the earth will see  
the salvation of our God.*

<sup>11</sup> *Depart, depart, go out from there!  
Touch no unclean thing!  
Come out from it and be pure,  
you who carry **the vessels** of the LORD.*

<sup>12</sup> *But you will not leave in haste  
or go in flight;  
for the LORD will go before you,  
the God of Israel will be your rear guard.*