

The Handwriting on the Wall

Chapter 5

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- I. The Fifth Point of the Five-Point Covenant Model
 - A. Who's in charge? (sovereignty): Chapter 1
 - 1. God
 - 2. Nebuchadnezzar
 - B. To whom do I report? (representation): Chapter 2
 - 1. Daniel
 - 2. The so-called wise men of Babylon
 - C. What's the law? (ethics): Chapter 3
 - 1. Theonomy (God's law)
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 - D. What happens when I keep or break the law? (positive and negative sanctions: Deut. 28): Chapter 4
 - 1. Blessings
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 - E. Does this outfit have a future? (eschatology): Chapter 5
 - 1. Live long and prosper (Eph. 6:1-3)
 - 2. The dust bin of history, a byword

- a. “But if you or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. (1 Kings 9:6–7).
- b. “Let the priests, the Lord’s ministers, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, ‘Spare Your people, O Lord, and do not make Your inheritance a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they among the peoples say, “Where is their God?”’” [Joel 2:17]).

II. Who wins in history? (2 Tim. 3)

- A. Man: “They will not make further progress, for their folly will be obvious to all” (v. 9).
- B. God: “Out of them all the Lord delivered me” (v. 11).

III. Background to Daniel 5

- A. Nebuchadnezzar has died and Nabonidus has replaced him as king.
 1. Belshazzar was not the son of Nebuchadnezzar but of Nabonidus who had married a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar. Nabonidus was in self-exile about 500 miles from the palace.
 2. Belshazzar was probably a grandson of Nebuchadnezzar (see Jer. 27:7).
 3. As king over the city of Babylon, he was officially and legally the son of Nebuchadnezzar. The word “son” in the Bible is often used to mean “descendant.”

B. Belshazzar holds a banquet by bringing in the religious vessels from the temple of the “Most High God” along with other religious vessels to conjure a favorable response from the gods (5:3–4) because the enemy was at the gates of the city (5:30–31): “They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone” (5:4; see Isa. 44:9–20).

1. Belshazzar was not just having a party. He was desperate to save his life and the life of Babylon, so he appealed to all the gods and probably even believed that the vessels, especially those of the temple, had occultic or religiously magical powers as an avenue to the gods.

a. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) two Army intelligence agents explain that the Nazis are on a quest to gain occult power. They are searching for Abner Ravenwood who knows where the Ark of the Covenant is stored. When the Nazis attempt to use it, the process backfires.

b. Ravenwood’s character is based on the life of Trevor Ravenscroft who wrote *Spear of Destiny* (1973) which claims that Hitler started World War II in order to capture the spear which he believed had pierced the side of Jesus at His crucifixion.

2. The lampstand is a witness to the events of the chapter.

a. It sheds light (Ex. 25:37).

b. Two lampstands—two witnesses—show up again in Revelation 11:4 (see Dan. 5:5). The only God who is speaking is the God associated with the lampstand.

3. As we will see, Belshazzar knew about Daniel even though initially he feigned ignorance.
4. The feast is called a “great bread [*lechem* for ‘bread’ from which we get ‘Bethlehem,’ ‘city of bread’]” and “drinking feast” (5:1).
 - a. The feast is a religious counterfeit: bread and wine.
 - b. “Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep” (1 Cor. 11:29–30).
- C. “Suddenly the fingers of a man’s hands emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster wall of the king’s palace. . .” (5:5). An undecipherable inscription is left behind.
- D. The young king is shaken, so much so that he soils himself.
 1. “and the knots of his loins were untied” (5:6). His sphincter muscle gave way.
 2. Euphemisms like this are common in the Bible (e.g., Judges 3:24: “covering his feet” or “relieving himself”).
- E. The Queen enters the banquet to reassure the king after learning that he had called the so-called wise men of Babylon to decipher the inscription (5:10–12). She had seen this before. **The fifth commandment comes into play, but as we will see, it’s a bit too late.**
- F. Daniel is brought in by the king to interpret the handwriting on the wall.

1. He is offered money and position if he will decipher the writing (5:16), hoping, I suppose, to get a favorable reading as if Daniel could manipulate the gods to make the bad guys go away.
2. Daniel refuses the gifts (5:17). **A lesson in the realm of politics.**
3. Daniel recounts the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar and appeals to him on that basis. He's looking for the same repentance from the young king. Was it a "death-bed" conversion for Belshazzar?

G. Belshazzar is without excuse.

1. "Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, **even though you knew all this**, but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. **But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and your ways, you have not glorified**" (Dan. 5:22; see Acts 17).
2. See Judges 2:11–13.

IV. The Riddle

A. MENE (מנא), MENE (מנא), TEQEL (תקל), AND (ו) PHARSIN (פרסין)

1. There was no context to the words. We're not told if they were written as one line, as four lines stacked on top of one another, or four lines side by side.
2. Like Hebrew, Aramaic is written without vowels, so a number of translations could have been possible:

- a. God is nowhere.
 - b. God is now here.
3. Even if the words could be read, there would be no way to determine if the meaning was good or bad.
 4. The initial phrase is translated: “Reckoned. Reckoned, weighed, and assessed.”
 5. This is similar to the problem of the wording of the Oracle of Delphi to the Lydian King Croesus: “If Croesus [*CREE-sus*] goes to war he will destroy a great empire.” So Croesus went out to meet the army of Cyrus and was utterly defeated. He destroyed his own great empire. The response is clever, since no matter what happens, the Oracle will be correct.
 6. The interpretation
 - a. MENE: Reckoned has the God of your kingdom, and paid it out.
 - b. TEQEL: Weighted have you been in the balances, and you have been found too light.
 - c. PERES: Assessed is your kingdom, and paid over to the Mede and Persian.
 7. There is no ambiguity in Daniel’s interpretation: “Your kingdom has been paid over to the Medes and Persians. . . . That same night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain” (5:28–30).
 8. The shadow the Lampstand casts (see Ex. 25:37) on the plaster wall looks like balancing scales with the center shaft higher than the three on each side.

B. Did Belshazzar Repent?

1. Chapter 5 begins with Belshazzar trying to humiliate Daniel by calling him “one of the sons” [Heb. *bene*] of the “captivity” of Judah.
2. At first, Daniel rejects what is perceived to be buying his efforts for a good result (5:17).
3. The Queen seems to be a believer who has the best interest of Belshazzar in mind.
 - a. She was not in attendance at the feast.
 - b. She comes when she learns the king is in desperate need.
 - c. “The queen entered the banquet hall because of the words of the king and his nobles; the queen spoke and said, ‘**O king, live forever!** Do not let your thoughts alarm you or your face be pale’” (Dan. 5:10).
 - d. “There is a man in your kingdom in whom is a spirit of the holy gods; and in the days of your father, illumination, insight and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him. And King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, appointed him chief of the magicians, conjurers, Chaldeans and diviners. This was because an extraordinary spirit, knowledge and insight, interpretation of dreams, explanation of enigmas and solving of difficult problems were found in this Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar. Let Daniel now be summoned and he will declare the interpretation” (5:11–12).
 - e. Daniel accepts the robe and necklace of gold and the new position in the kingdom.

V. The Woman caught in the Act of Adultery (John 8).

- A. The story of the woman taken in adultery occurs between the Bread and the Lampstand sections of John's gospel.
1. John's gospel presents Jesus as the one Who tabernacled with us (John 1:14), and in part the gospel moves through the furniture of the tabernacle.¹
 2. John 6 presents Jesus as the bread of life, and in John 7 He is the drink of life (v. 37).
 3. Jesus as True Bread is set in contrast to the false loaves, the scribes and Pharisees. As Belshazzar was bread that was measured and found wanting, so are the Jewish leaders on this occasion.²
- B. Like the hand writing on the wall, Jesus as the New Lampstand writes on the floor of temple.

¹See for instance James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock [1988] 1999), 265–269.

²In the ritual of inspection, the woman is to have bread in her hands (Numbers 5). The stones held in the hands of the scribes and Pharisees are symbolic loaves, that call down the inspection upon them, and which they drop when their guilt is exposed.