

## The Writing on the Wall – Daniel 5

1-3 King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for his thousand nobles, and in the presence of the thousand he drank wine. Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar ordered the **gold and silver vessels** that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple at Jerusalem to be brought so that the king and his nobles, his consorts, and his concubines **could drink from them**.

The **golden vessels** that had been taken out of the sanctuary of the House of God in Jerusalem were then brought, and the king, his nobles, his consorts, and his concubines **drank from them**.

4-6 **They drank** wine and praised the gods of **gold and silver**, bronze, iron, wood, and stone.

Just then, the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace opposite the lampstand, so that the king could see the hand as it wrote.

The king's face darkened, and his thoughts alarmed him; the joints of his loins were loosened and his knees knocked together.

7-9 The king called loudly for the exorcists, Chaldeans, and diviners to be brought. The king addressed the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever can read this writing and tell me its meaning shall be clothed in purple and wear a **golden chain** on his neck, and shall rule as one of three in the kingdom."

Then all the king's wise men came, but they could not read the writing or make known its meaning to the king. King Belshazzar grew exceedingly alarmed and his face darkened, and his nobles were dismayed.

10-12 Because of the state of the king and his nobles, the queen came to the banquet hall. The queen spoke up and said, "O king, live forever! Let your thoughts not alarm you or your face darken.

There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him; in your father's time, illumination, understanding, and wisdom like that of the gods were to be found in him, and your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, exorcists, Chaldeans, and diviners. Seeing that there is to be found in Daniel (whom the king called Belshazzar) extraordinary spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, to explain riddles and solve problems, let Daniel now be called to tell the meaning [of the writing]."

13-16 Daniel was then brought before the king.

The king addressed Daniel, "You are Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah whom my father, the king, brought from Judah. I have heard about you that you have the spirit of the gods in you, and that illumination, knowledge, and extraordinary wisdom are to be found in you.

Now the wise men and exorcists have been brought before me to read this writing and to make known its meaning to me. But they could not tell what it meant.

I have heard about you, that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known its meaning to me, you shall be clothed in purple and wear a **golden** chain on your neck and rule as one of three in the kingdom."

17-21 Then Daniel said in reply to the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself, and give your presents to others. But I will read the writing for the king, and make its meaning known to him.

O king, the Most High God bestowed kingship, grandeur, glory, and majesty upon your father Nebuchadnezzar. And because of the grandeur that He bestowed upon him, all the peoples and nations of

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every language trembled in fear of him. He put to death whom he wished, and whom he wished he let live; he raised high whom he wished and whom he wished he brought low.

But when he grew haughty and willfully presumptuous, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was removed from him. He was driven away from men, and his mind made like that of a beast, and his habitation was with wild asses. He was fed grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until he came to know that the Most High God is sovereign over the realm of man, and sets over it whom He wishes.

22-24 But you, Belshazzar his son, did not humble yourself although you knew all this. You exalted yourself against the Lord of Heaven, and had the **vessels** of His temple brought to you. You and your nobles, your consorts, and your concubines drank wine from them and praised the gods of **silver and gold**, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear, or understand; but the God who controls your life-breath and every move you make—Him you did not glorify!

He therefore made the hand appear, and caused the writing to be inscribed.

25-28 This is the writing that is inscribed: *mene mene tekel upharsin*.

And this is its meaning: *mene*—God has numbered [the days of] your kingdom and brought it to an end;

*tekel*—you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting;

*peres*—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.”

## Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 22a

“And the writing of the letter [*hannishtevan*] was written in the Aramaic script, and set forth in the Aramaic tongue” (Ezra 4:7). The term “*hannishtevan*” is similar to the word *nishtana*, meaning changed, alluding to the fact that the script had been changed.

And it is written with regard to the writing on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace: “Then came in all the king’s wise men. But they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation” (Daniel 5:8), and the reason they could not read it is that it was written in the new script that Ezra would transmit. And it is written: “That he shall write for himself a second [*mishne*] Torah” (Deuteronomy 17:18), where “second [*mishne*]” teaches that it is written in a script that is apt to be changed [*lehishtannot*]...

...According to Rabbi Shimon, who says that this script was not changed at all, what is the reason “they could not read the writing” (Daniel 5:8)?

Rav says: Because it was written for them in gimatriyya [=ATBSh/שׁ”אתב]: Yod, tet, tav; yod, tet, tav; alef, dalet, khaf; peh, vav, gimmel, het, mem, tet...

ן	י	ס	ר	פ	ו	ל	ק	ת	א	נ	מ	א	נ	מ
ט	מ	ח	ג	ו	פ	ך	ד	א	ת	ט	י	ת	ט	י

And Shmuel says: “*Mamtos nankafei a’alran*.”

And Rabbi Yoḥanan says: *Anem anem leket nisrapu*...

ס	ו	ת	מ	מ
י	פ	ק	נ	נ
(?)ן	ר	ל	א	א

29 Then, at Belshazzar’s command, they clothed Daniel in purple, placed a **golden** chain on his neck, and proclaimed that he should rule as one of three in the kingdom.

30 That very night, Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed.

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Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Belshazzar's Feast (1635-1638)