**King Belshazzar (grandson of Nebuchadnezzar)**

<http://cojs.org/belshazzar-s_feast_and_the_writing_on_the_wall-_rembrandt_-1606-1669/>

Chapter five of the Book of Daniel describes the royal banquet of King Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian emperor who had conquered Jerusalem, exiled its people, destroyed the Temple and carried off its sacred vessels in triumph. Interestingly, the Bible portrays him as eventually acknowledging his hubris and humbling himself, as he says, ‘before the Ever-Living One, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion and whose kingdom endures throughout the generations. All the inhabitants of the earth are of no account…’ (Daniel 4-31-32). (Daniel 4-31-32).

Belshazzar, his son, was nowhere near as humble. In the midst of a gala banquet he ordered the sacred vessels to be brought to his palace. In addition to profaning them by using them as common drinking cups, he added sacrilege by toasting and praising his pagan gods. As punishment for glorifying lifeless gods, the live hand of God writes a cryptic message on the palace wall-

*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 that is inscribed- Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin…*(Daniel 5-22-25).

Rembrandt has captured the startled expression of the king and his guests. He has remained true to the biblical text insofar as only the king beholds the inscription, while the others drop their vessels and gaze at the king. It is noteworthy that he has painted the words of the cryptic message in Hebrew letters, but has written them up and down rather than from right to left, offering an inventive explanation for why they could not be deciphered.

****

Perhaps the night that he partied, Belshazzar had no idea that the armies of Babylon had been routed and the Persians were nearly at the gates of his city.

Either that, or he was thoroughly satisfied that mighty Babylon could withstand the siege of the Persians, because he seemed totally unconcerned about any impending attack. It was party time, and he was feasting with a thousand of his lords, along with his wives and concubines. He even thought it great fun to drink from the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had pillaged years before from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

But then he saw a mysterious hand appear that scrawled the now-famous handwriting on the wall. Belshazzar was terrified at what he witnessed, and he called on all the wise men of Babylon to interpret what was written. But none of them could decipher it, even with the reward of being named number-three-man in the empire.

Then the queen arrives on the scene after hearing of the commotion. She was likely the wife of his father Nabonidus, since it was stated previously that Belshazzar’s wives were already at the banquet. And she is old enough to remember that Daniel, who would by then be in his seventies or eighties, had been pretty good at figuring out this sort of thing.

So Daniel was urgently summoned and brought before the king to interpret the writing, and offered the third place in the kingdom if he could do so. Daniel tells the king he isn’t interested in any rewards or promotions, but that he will interpret the writings. But first he gives Belshazzar a good stiff lecture. “You have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. They have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your lords, your wives and your concubines, have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.”

Then Daniel reads the words to him. “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.”

Why couldn’t the other wise men have read something so straightforward? It is recorded in Aramaic in Daniel’s book, so presumably it was written on the wall in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language of the Babylonian court and populace, so why would it have been such a puzzle?

We don’t really know for sure, but here is one theory: Aramaic was written right to left with the same letters that ancient Hebrew was. It was a written language without vowels and no space between words. Context, therefore, had a lot to do with understanding what written words meant. If there had been a long passage, it would have been easier to figure it out, but here was only a string of letters, the rough equivalent of “MNMNTKLPHRSN” in Roman characters. This combination of consonants could have meant a number of things.

Further to this, for those who knew their Aramaic, as even Belshazzar did, even if they did get the right words, the actual phrase written was more or less nonsense. Basically it said, “Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided.” It sounded more like rough notes scribbled by some merchant on the margin of his accounts than anything of great significance.

The challenge facing Daniel was to find out not only what the words were, but also give them meaning. While others could have read the words, only God, as the author, could have revealed their meaning.

“MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Mene repeated twice meant numbered and finished numbering it. Tekel meant weighed, and in a clever change of vowel sounds also means found to be too light. Upharsin meant it was now divided or split.

This time as Daniel interprets the writing, he reads the last word in the singular tense of the verb, thus rendering upharsin as peres. By switching in a few alternate vowels between the Aramaic consonants, it now spelled “Persians.” Daniel was telling Belshazzar that God had taken his realm from him and given it to the Persians.

As he had promised, Belshazzar went ahead and clothed Daniel in the royal purple and draped the gold chain around his neck and proclaimed him third ruler in the king-dom. Whether he believed Daniel or not, we don’t know. But we do know that he soon discovered the truth. That very night the Persians entered Babylon ... and Belshazzar was slain.

According to the Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon, the Persians diverted the water from the Euphrates that flowed through the city, and they then entered the city under the walls along the riverbed.

<https://countdown.org/en/books/daniel-prophet/handwriting-on-the-wall/>