

# Daniel 5

## The Writing's On the Wall

God Destroys a Blasphemous Human Ruler:  
Second Demonstration of God's Sovereignty over Human Kingdoms

### Structure

Milne only finds six of the most important fairy-tale functions paralleled in Daniel 5 and notes that "the story as a whole does not closely resemble the heroic fairy-tale in structure."<sup>i</sup> It is to content not form that we must look to identify the structure of this chapter.

Lucas provides the following chiasmic outline<sup>ii</sup>:

- A Introduction (1-4)
  - B The omen appears (5-6)
    - C The failure of the sages (7-9)
      - D The queen's confidence that Daniel will interpret the omen (10-12)
        - E The king seeks Daniel's help (13-16)
          - E` Daniel rebukes the king (17-23)
            - D` Daniel interprets the omen (24-28)
              - C` The success of Daniel rewarded (29)
                - B` The omen fulfilled (30-31 [6:1])

Another way of structuring the chapter is as follows<sup>iii</sup>:

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|--|--|
| A1 Description of the banquet (1-4)                    | A1` Interpretation of the banquet (22-23)                            |
| A2 Handwriting on the wall (5)                         | A2` Interpretation of the handwriting (24-28)                        |
| A3 Offer of honours for interpretation (6-7)           | A3` Bestowal of honours for interpretation (29)                      |
| A4 Failure of the king's wise men (8-9)                | A4` Fall of the Babylonian Empire (30-31)                            |
| B Recollection of Nebuchadnezzar's interpreter (10-12) | B` Nebuchadnezzar's interpreter recalls dream interpretation (18-21) |
| C Daniel arrives; king offers gifts (13-16)            | C` Daniel declines gifts (17)  |



### Points of comparison and contrast between Daniel 5 and Daniel

3<sup>iv</sup>:

<i>Daniel 5</i>	<i>Daniel 3</i>
Straight into the action: no opening temporal marker (v1)	Straight into the action: no opening temporal marker (v1)
"Belshazzar the king made..." (v1)	"Nebuchadnezzar the king made..." (v1)
A blasphemous banquet (vv3-4)	A blasphemous statue (vv5-6, etc.)
The greatness of the banquet (v1)	The greatness of the statue and dedication ceremony (vv1-7)
Belshazzar: centre of attention (v1)	Nebuchadnezzar: centre of attention (v3, 7, etc.)
Belshazzar's commands meet with compliance (vv2-3)	Nebuchadnezzar's commands meet with compliance (vv2-3, vv4-7, etc.)
Those assembled engage in idolatrous worship (v4)	Those assembled engage in idolatrous worship (v7)

Atmosphere of festivity and celebration  
The manipulation of key political figures (vv1- 2)  
Belshazzar's egocentricity: "his wine", "his nobles", "his wives", "his concubines"

The idolatrous use of the gold goblets (v3)  
Bel condemned because does worship images and because doesn't worship exiles' God  
The controlling hands are not the hands of the king but of God  
An exile passes death sentence on the king

Atmosphere of festivity and celebration (v5, 7)  
The manipulation of key political figures (vv2- 3)  
Nebuchadnezzar's egocentricity: "my sanity", "my honour", "my splendour", "my advisers", "my nobles"

The idolatrous use of the gold statue (v5)  
3 exiles condemned because they do not worship the image of gold  
The king asks "what god will deliver you from my hands?"  
The king passes death sentence on the exiles

## The King Throws a Party (vv1-4)

### *Straight into the Action*

We will discover at the grand climax (v30) that we are dealing with very swift judgment. Indeed the very climax to the account supplies the temporal marker missing from the commencement of the story. But the reader must be immersed in the action from the outset. This is not a dated history but enacted history. The absence of dating prevents the reader from thinking that his own life is set in a different historical period for this would encourage the reader to stand at some distance from the action. Everything portrayed in this chapter happened within the space of a few hours. The drama must be recaptured. There is not a moment to be lost, there is no time to mark time (contrast 1:1; 2:1; 4:29). And so it is that, as in Daniel 3, the opening of the scene is abrupt.

### *The Creation of the King*

Again, as in Daniel 3, we meet the same opening grammatical structure<sup>v</sup>:

5:1 'Belshazzar *the king made...*'

3:1 'Nebuchadnezzar *the king made...*'

## A Grandiose Creation

In short, as Fewell puts it: "One makes a great feast; the other makes a great image." Just as the immensity of the image, and the greatness of the dedication ceremony are stressed in Chapter 3, so here stress is laid upon the greatness of Belshazzar's banquet, as indicated by the large numbers invited, their political importance, and the quality of the crockery and cutlery used. Belshazzar draws attention to his own importance and centrality by drinking wine "in the presence of the thousand."<sup>vi</sup>

Wood speaks of personally standing in a room excavated by Koldewey, measuring 165 feet long by 55 feet wide, which may have served as the banquet room described in this chapter.<sup>vii</sup> The holding of immense banquets by kings in the ancient world is well documented. From the Royal Archives of Assyria comes an account of a banquet held by King Ashurnasirpal (883-859 BCE). He invited an extraordinary number of guests, which included 1500 "officials of all my palaces"<sup>viii</sup>, perhaps comparable with Belshazzar's 1000 nobles.

We do not know the precise background to Belshazzar's "great feast." Proposals include:

1. A celebration of Belshazzar's coronation as sole ruler following the defeat of Nabonidus (Shea). If correct this explanation underscores the appropriateness

of referring to Belshazzar as “king” and squares with the absence of any mention of Nabonidus. However, verse 16 *may* tell against this if Belshazzar’s offer to make Daniel “the third highest ruler” implies Belshazzar is second to Nabonidus (but see exegesis below).

2. An *akitu* festival in honour of the Babylonian moon god, Sin (Wolters, following Beaulieu).<sup>ix</sup>

Given that Nabonidus tried to replace Marduk with Sin as head of the Babylonian pantheon, this second proposal is worthy of special consideration. There is no explicit mention of Sin in this chapter. The important word-play involving knots may involve an allusion to Sin, though an allusion to Marduk is perhaps more probable (see below).

Nabonidus did institute an *akitu* (New Year) festival in Harran, celebrated on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tashritu. Beaulieu argues that Babylon was taken on the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tashritu.<sup>x</sup> If this is the case then “the great feast” may have been an *akitu* festival celebrated in Babylon by the supporters of Nabonidus. The *akitu* festival of Marduk was celebrated at a different time of the year, in Nisanu, the beginning of the Babylonian religious New Year.

Wolters (202) makes the point that the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tashritu always falls

“in the days immediately following either the Harvest Moon or the Hunter’s Moon, the only times during the year when the moon for several days running rises right after sunset and shines throughout the night.”<sup>xi</sup>

It was the perception of people that the moon on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tashritu was unusually large and luminous, making this an appropriate time to stage an *akitu* festival in honour of the moon deity. The dramatic words “that very night” (v30) may not mean ‘the night of the same day on which the feast was held’ but rather indicate that the feast itself was nocturnal. If so, then this adds further weight to the real possibility that Belshazzar’s feast honoured the moon god. Babylonians believed this was the night when Sin showed himself in all his splendour. Instead, they are confronted with the terrifying self-revelation of Yahweh.

## A Blasphemous Creation

In Daniel 3 the making of the image did not merely provide the setting of the story. It provided the first element in the conflict to be resolved. So it is here.<sup>xii</sup> The nature of the feast “created” by Belshazzar is essentially blasphemous, as was the case with Nebuchadnezzar’s statue.

## A Kingly Creation

As can be seen from the comparative chart above 5:1-4 also mirrors Daniel 3 in the way it stresses compliance with the king’s command, and in the way it involves the assembled persons in idolatrous worship. In both chapters 3 and 5 after those summoned by the king are assembled to participate in that which the king has “made”, they are required to blasphemously commit an act of idolatry.

## An Ape'd Creation

Fewell further points out that correspondence between chapters 3 and 5 goes beyond broad plot parallels:

The parallels between 5 and 3 exist on both the levels of content and narrator's style and technique... what seals the association between the two stories is the way in which the similar content is presented. The opening parallels between Daniel 5 and 3 are underscored by the narrator's word choice, sentence structure, repetition, and organization of the presented material.

Belshazzar is related to his "father" (v2). Actually, Nabonidus was Belshazzar's father in the flesh, but here "father" (this relationship is stressed; cf. v11, 18), is used in a loose sense to indicate that Belshazzar was Nebuchadnezzar's "grandson", or "descendant", even possibly "successor"<sup>xiii</sup>. The portrayal of Belshazzar as Nebuchadnezzar's son is significant. Fewell explains, "One comes after the other. One knows of the other and imitates. A son models his father." Belshazzar's aspiration to be as great as his "father" lies at the heart of all the thematic and grammatical interconnections between the narrative of Daniel 5 and that of Daniel 3.

We can only speculate as to the political motives that moved Belshazzar to "create" this banquet. In our study of Daniel 3 we noted that Nebuchadnezzar's manufacture of the image of gold aimed at securing his rule via imposed religious unity. Consequently, it was an act of self-deification that required all his subjects to completely submit themselves to his authority. Does Belshazzar's feast have a similar underlying motive?

The subsequent ease with which "Darius the Mede" (see separate notes on *Historical Problems in Daniel*) took over the kingdom may itself be suggestive of complicity with the nobles, but the text does not openly indicate that undercurrents of political intrigue motivated Belshazzar to hold a magnificent banquet in order to shore up his position. The textual stress falls rather upon Belshazzar's attempt to ape Nebuchadnezzar.

In Daniel 3 the focus is upon the image, even if Nebuchadnezzar is also on front stage, but in Daniel 5 the focus is not so much on the banquet *per se*, the spotlight is upon Belshazzar directly as the one, for example, who '*drinks wine in front of the thousand*'. The previous chapter has ended in an ironical fashion, with the "humbled" Nebuchadnezzar praising God and yet, as the masterful mental gymnast he proved to be, managing to simultaneously massage his own ego: "*my sanity, my honour, my splendour*" (4:36). It is significant that in this respect Daniel 5 carries on from where Daniel 4 leaves off. The egocentricity of the Babylonian ruler finds a successor in the aspirant Belshazzar, and hence the immediate stress on *his* lords, *his* wives, *his* concubines.

### *A Pale Shadow of Nebuchadnezzar*

And yet the indications of the text before us are that Belshazzar faces a very steep uphill battle to persuade anyone that he is as great as Nebuchadnezzar was. Though he apes Nebuchadnezzar's "making" of the image in his "making" of the banquet, it is not really comparable with the immensity and sheer scale of Nebuchadnezzar's achievement. We are not dealing with an impact upon all the peoples of the world here. There is no imagery here of Belshazzar being, as it were, the world centre. In Chapter 3 the completeness of Nebuchadnezzar's mastery was underscored by the

constant reiteration of all the different types of distinguished political figures who unhesitatingly jump when Nebuchadnezzar commands, and do precisely and exactly what he demands. The long list of musical instruments cited there also indicates that the sheer scale of the celebration which attended the dedication of the image is out of all proportion to the relatively meagre attempt at greatness aspired to by Belshazzar.

Fewell contrasts the different ways in which Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar handle power:

Nebuchadnezzar commands the allegiance of his officials with the threat of death; Belshazzar cajoles his lords with wine and merriment. Nebuchadnezzar assumes power; Belshazzar still needs affirmation of power.

Belshazzar bears a superficial likeness to David's son, Adonijah, as portrayed in 1 Kings 1. As Fewell points out, both have to deal with the reputation of their 'fathers.' Further, neither has done anything to elicit respect and political support. Belshazzar, like Adonijah, seeks to buy such support with food, wine and entertainment.

### **The Act of Blasphemy (v4)**

*As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.*

There were plenty of temple vessels available for all of the thousand or so guests to use, for in Ezra 1:7-11 we read:

*Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. Cyrus, king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. This was the inventory: 30 gold dishes, 1000 silver dishes, 29 silver pans, 30 gold bowls, 410 matching silver bowls, 1000 other articles. In all there were 5400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all of these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.*

It is significant, especially given the contextual parallels with Daniel 3, that the temple goblets were made of gold and silver. In Daniel 2 Nebuchadnezzar was identified as being the head of gold in the statue of his dream. In Daniel 3 Nebuchadnezzar seeks to take control of the reins of history by making a statue of pure gold; by seeking to make his own kingdom the entire statue; a kingdom which will exclude all weakness through totally removing the possibility of any disobedience in all the world. Effectively Nebuchadnezzar is not content with merely being the head of gold. The whole enterprise is thoroughly idolatrous and not merely because he demands that all worship the image, but because the image represents the fact that Nebuchadnezzar's understanding and exercise of kingship is a perversion of God-intended kingship as delegated to Adam (Dan 2:37-38). To sum: Nebuchadnezzar's *selem* is a corruption of the *Selem* of God (Gen 1:26).

*(For the rest of this exposition download Volume 2 of Daniel)*

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<sup>i</sup> Vladimir Propp, 230.

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<sup>ii</sup> *Daniel*, 124.

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from Redditt (*Daniel*, 88) who in turn has modified Shea.

<sup>iv</sup> Fewell, 114.

<sup>v</sup> Fewell, 114.

<sup>vi</sup> Fewell, 111.

<sup>vii</sup> Wood, 68.

<sup>viii</sup> "The Banquet of Ashurnasipal II," translated by A. Leo Oppenheim, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (ed. James B. Pritchard; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969): 558-561.

<sup>ix</sup> Al Wolters, "Belshazzar's Feast and the Cult of the Moon God Sin" in *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 200.

<sup>x</sup> See Wolters, 200ff.

<sup>xi</sup> Wolters elaborates: "The phenomenon of Harvest Moon and Hunter's Moon has to do with the angle of the ecliptic relative to the horizon and is technically described in terms of the moon's "retardation" in different seasons of the year. Without going into the details of the celestial mechanics involved, we note that the full moon nearest the fall equinox (the Harvest Moon) introduces a period of several days when the moon rises right after the sunset, and that the same phenomenon, though less marked, can be observed after the next full moon (the Hunter's Moon). Although it is true at every full moon that sunset and moonrise are virtually simultaneous, it is only in the case of Harvest and Hunter's Moon that this near simultaneity holds for a longer period. The effect, of course, is that the moon has the whole night to itself for a number of successive nights."

<sup>xii</sup> Fewell, 114.

<sup>xiii</sup> So Longman III, *Daniel*, 136.