

# THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF “THE WRITING ON THE WALL” IN

DANIEL 5:25-28

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Background to the study**

Daniel 5 tells the well-known story of Belshazzar’s feast and the handwriting on the wall.<sup>1</sup> This incident occurred after the king had ordered for the temple vessels to be brought for the drinking and toasting by himself and his companions to the gods. This unprecedented sacrilege of using the holy vessels of Yahweh’s temple in their drunken worship of idols led to a sudden and dramatic turn of events.<sup>2</sup> A hand appeared out of nowhere. It wrote an incomprehensible series of words on the wall,<sup>3</sup> this intervention came without trumpet blasts rather suddenly the fingers of a hand appeared on the palace wall and before the wine-reddened eyes of the king, began writing just four words (v. 25), the first two of them identical; the hand

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<sup>1</sup> Albert M Wolters, “Untying the King’s Knots: Physiology and Wordplay in Daniel 5,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 1 (1991): 117.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Zimmermann, “The Writing on the Wall: Dan. 5:25 F.,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 55, no. 3 (January 1965): 201.

vanished, leaving only the blazing letters on the wall.<sup>1</sup> Segal argued that it is specifically the king who saw the hand writing and no other people present at the banquet saw the writing.<sup>2</sup>

The question remains, could this inscription has been written in Aramaic, the *lingua franca*, and the wise men unable to read it? Was the inscription visible to the king and not to the wise men? What theological lessons can we draw from the texts? The scope of this work did not cover the argument on the kingship of Belshazzar or the authorship of the book, rather a theological interpretation of Daniel 5:25-28, with its background from the text. However, this study will unraveled the theological lessons and this may refocus the argument on this chapter to a productive bible study.

## STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Daniel 5: 25-28 contains an obvious wordplay in the form of the message that was mysteriously inscribed on the wall.<sup>3</sup> Shea, gave a tripartite center section which can form a structural explanation to the texts in study; three major passages of dialogue appear in that portion of narrative which is bound by two blocs of Dan 5:1-8 and Dan 5:22-29. However, the first of these is given by the queen (mother), on the basis of that excellent past (but now-

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<sup>1</sup> Gleason L. Jr Archer, "Daniel" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Ed. Frank E. Gabelein, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1985), 70–71. Cf. Stephen N. Haskell, *The Story of Daniel the Prophet* (Berrien Springs, MI: Advocate Publishing Company, 1903), 68–69. Haskell described the scene as, "in the palace halls Belshazzar feasted with a thousand of his lords. Music resounded through the brilliantly lighted rooms. The nobles lounged about the tables sumptuously spread. Court women and concubines of the king entered those halls. It was a feast of Bacchus, and they drank to the health of the king on his throne....that time came when the king lifted the goblet filled with sparkling wine. His hand grew stiff, for on the opposite wall over against the lights was a bloodless hand, writing words of an unknown language. The wine cup fell to the floor; the king's countenance grew pale; he trembled violently, and his knees smote together until the gorgeous girdle of his loins loosened and fell aside. The loud laughter ceased, and the music died away. Terror-stricken, a thousand guests lo from the face of the king to the writing on the wall"

<sup>2</sup> Michael Segal, "Rereading the Writing on the Wall (Daniel 5)," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125, no. 1 (2013): 166, doi:10.1515/zaw-2013-0009. This position seems not to be considering the setting and context of this narrative; however, it will be discussed within this work.

<sup>3</sup> Bill T Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112, no. 3 (September 1993): 479.

neglected) reputation (vss. 9-12). Following the arrival of Daniel in response to the royal summons, Belshazzar presents to him the problem of interpreting that handwriting on the wall (vss. 13-16) and the third major section at the center of this literary structure comes from the first half of Daniel's subsequent speech (vss. 18-21).<sup>1</sup>

Following the lead of modern sociolinguistic studies, we may call 5:1-4 as "orientation"<sup>2</sup>; however, the most interesting feature in this orientation is the repetition of the basic content of v. 2 in v. 3.<sup>3</sup> An epilogue is attached to this narrative of Dan 5, but it is extremely brief. It consists only of the historical notice found in Dan 5:30-31, telling about the fall of Babylonian kingdom, the death of Belshazzar, and the reception of the kingdom of Darius the Mede.<sup>4</sup>

### The Chiastic Literary Structure of Daniel 5<sup>5</sup>

A. The banquet (vss. 1-4); Handwriting on the wall (vs. 5); Offer to Honors for interpretation (vss. 6-8a)

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Shea, "Further Literary Structures in Daniel 2-7: An Analysis of Daniel 5, and the Broader Relationships within Chapters 2-7," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 285.

<sup>2</sup> Berlin define "orientation" as a passage "where the time, place, and persons of the narrative are identified" Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 102 in Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6," 480. The reference to drinking wine clearly forms an *inclusion* with the opening word of v. 4, marking these verses as a literary unit.

<sup>3</sup> In the narrator's description of the vessels, we are twice told they were "brought forth" (haphel of *nepaq*, w. 2 and 3). Then in v. 5, the same verb is employed, this time in the *peal*? The subject is now the fingers of a human hand, which wrote a divine message of doom. This is an example of subtle polysemantic wordplay, in which the same word is deliberately used with a calculated, ironic nuance. The play is metaphonic, since it depends on the use of a verbal root in different derived stems (*peal* and *haphel*). But as literary critics have long since understood it, repetition is not redundancy. It often serves an intensifying role or signals an important concern of the narrator by making an ever so light variation in wording or phraseology in the repeated material; This is the case in v. 3, where the narrator repeats his description of the vessels from Jerusalem Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6," 479-480. Cf. Polaski observed that "Belshazzar under influence of the wine, orders the temple vessels brought to him". He submits "'influence' appears in Biblical Aramaic in relation to official exercise of power" Donald C Polaski, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin: Writing and Resistance in Daniel 5 and 6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 4 (2004): 651.

<sup>4</sup> William H Shea, "Darius the Mede: An Update," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20, no. 3 (1982): 229-247.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from William H Shea, "Further Literary Structures in Daniel 2-7: An Analysis of Daniel 5, and the Broader Relationships within Chapters 2-7," 290.

B. The Queen's Speech: Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, and the Gift of Interpretation (vss. 9-12a)

C. Literary Join I: Daniel called, Daniel comes (vss. 12b-13a)

D. Belshazzar's Speech: Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel, and the Gift of Interpretation

C'. Literary Join II: Daniel's Speech: King requests, Daniel Complies (vss. 16b-17)

B'. Daniel's Speech: Nebuchadnezzar's dream interpreted by Daniel (vss. 18-21)

A'. Interpretation of the Banquet (vss. 22-23); Interpretation of the Handwriting (vss. 24-28);

Bestowal of Honors for Interpretation (vs. 29)

Epilogue: Fall of Babylon (vss. 30-31)

### **WRITING IN BABYLONIAN EMPIRE**

The book of Daniel chapter 1 introduce us to biblical evidence of training in ancient Babylonian world.

<sup>3</sup> Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles,

<sup>4</sup> youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every *branch of* wisdom, endowed with understanding, and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and *he ordered him* to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

<sup>5</sup> And the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and *appointed* that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service.

<sup>6</sup> Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

<sup>7</sup> Then the commander of the officials assigned *new* names to them; and to Daniel he assigned *the name* Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abed-nego. (Dan 1:3-7 NAS)

They had to learn a minimum of three languages to function as a scribe: Sumerian (the traditional sacred tongue written in cuneiform sign); Babylonian or Akkadian (the national

dialect of Semitic origin, also in cuneiform); and Aramaic (the international language of business and diplomacy, written much like the letter forms of Hebrew).<sup>1</sup>

They were called “Magician” or “Writer”, this word literally means “engraver” or “writer” and only secondarily “diviner, astrologer, magician”. The root from which the word comes signifies “to cut, scratch” and was used for engraving or writing with a stylus, and the related hebrew *heret* is the word for “engraving-tool” or “stylus” vs. 20.<sup>2</sup>

In this case, the religious Scribes or sacred writers who recorded and preserved the materials used in the Babylonian religious activities meticulously chronicled, for example, the movements of the heavenly bodies in order to gain religious wisdom from them.<sup>3</sup> Drawing from this backdrop, Broida alludes that sacred texts are handed down by deities or by early, paradigmatic leaders.<sup>4</sup> Could this inadequacy of reflecting the gods in which the wise men of Babylon claims to represent provoked the decision of Nebuchadnezzar to dispose them? (2:8-9). However, the same king, acknowledged the God of Daniel and his relationship with him, chapter 2 vs 47

The king answered Daniel and said, "Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery."  
(Dan 2:47 NAS)

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<sup>1</sup> Eriks Galeniaks, “Class Notes for OTST 672 The Book of Daniel” (Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, September 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Marian Broida, “Textualizing Divination: The Writing on the Wall in Daniel 5:25,” *Vetus Testamentum* 62, no. 1 (2012): 3, doi:10.1163/156853311X613746.

This context affirms that unravelling mysteries have to do with revelation from God or gods as the case maybe.

### **THE ROYAL BANQUET AND THE WRITING ON THE WALL**

From vs. 28 and 30 it can be concluded that the feast took place during the night that Babylon fell to Cyrus' forces.<sup>5</sup> The banquet of Belshazzar reveals the self-assurance of the king and his nobbles, as they drink from the vessel taken from the temple in Jerusalem. He is pagan not only in his drinking but also in his act of sacrilege, as he praises "the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (5:4).<sup>6</sup> However, Belshazzar's banquet epitomizes the Babylonian culture as decadent, perverted, ostentatious, vulgar, carousing, debauched, and self-indulgent, a scene that might have been designed to illustrate the wisdom literature's warnings about power, sex, and drink (see Prov. 23:29-35)<sup>7</sup>. Though we know little about Belshazzar, but his actions speak for themselves, he combined hedonism, hatred and idolatry in a social event that captured the essence of himself and his kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Rev, vol. 4 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1976), 801. Cf. contemporary inscriptions make it clear that Babylon was captured without a blow and that Nabonidus was presently taken prisoner. Cyrus' own inscription suggests that the populace welcomed him with joy. There was a later tradition, however, that the city was taken by a night attack while the inhabitants were celebrating a feast. *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 6 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), 420-421.

<sup>6</sup> William A VanGemeren, *Daniel*, The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary, Ed. Gary M. Burge and Andrew E. Hill (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 790.

<sup>7</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, vol. 30, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 113.

<sup>8</sup> Feasting in the ancient world had to do with sexual display and wine; But in all these, Biblical records has shown that great banquets do not fare too well. Instances such as recorded in Genesis 40:20-22, when Pharaoh gave a feast in honor of his birthday and he lifted the head of the chief baker. Also King Xerxes of Persia, after seven days of banqueting and drinking demanded that his beautiful Queen, Vashti, to display for all to see (Esther 1). King Herod's birthday recorded another dilemma of John the Baptist's head been cut off, just after Herodias' daughter danced for the guests.

They sang in honor of their Babylonian gods, whose images adorned the various temples of the city<sup>9</sup>, which is the orientation's climax in profanation.<sup>10</sup> God did not let Belshazzar's challenge go unanswered. Suddenly, a supernatural hand appeared, writing a verdict on the wall where the king could see it. Though the king was able to feign no fear of the war outside the city, he could not hide his horror at this apparition.<sup>11</sup>

### **The handwriting on the wall**

Suddenly the fingers of a man's hand emerged and began writing opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, and the king saw the back of the hand that did the writing. Then the king's face grew pale, and his thoughts alarmed him; and his hip joints went slack, and his knees began knocking together. (Dan 5:5-6 NAS)

There are debate today whether only Belshazzar saw the writing or it was visible to his guests also. Segal argued that only the king saw the handwriting; since the verses do not record that any other people present at the banquet saw this writing. However, he agreed that the writing actually took place and the inscription was on the wall, but it was revealed to the king alone from among the entire crowd.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Segal, Goldingay said "Although we are only told of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 4:802. Cf. Shea, "Further Literary Structures in Daniel 2-7," 282. "Excavations at Babylon have amply confirmed the fact that there were in the city an abundance of temples, and thus also of gods resident in them; so there was no shortage of gods for Belshazzar and his friends to praise".

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Techniques in Daniel 5 and 6," 482.

<sup>11</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Daniel*, Africa Bible Commentary. Ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 998.

<sup>12</sup> Segal, "Rereading the Writing on the Wall (Daniel 5)," 166–167. "If the king were sitting on a dais, the lampstand would probably have been set near him, so that it was on the white wall illumined by the candelabrum, well within the monarch's vision, that the hand wrote. Robert Koldewey's excavations at Babylon have uncovered just such a large banqueting hall with walls of white ... *Nebhrashta* is a lamp or a candelabrum perhaps a Semitic word...`to be clear, bright'" *The Interpreter's Bible*, 6:424.

king's reaction to the portent (v 6), this need not suggest that only he saw it"<sup>13</sup>. Archer argued that they all gazed at the words on the wall,<sup>14</sup> Hartman and Di Leila were of this view too<sup>15</sup>. It is obvious that everyone in the banquet hall saw the writing. Argument of Segal was based on comparing Nebuchadnezzar's dream with Belshazzar's physical handwriting on the wall! However, his emphasis on the "thought" may equally be faulty.<sup>16</sup>

### Why the Sages were unable to read it

<sup>7</sup> The king called aloud to bring in the conjurers, the Chaldeans and the diviners. The king spoke and said to the wise men of Babylon, "Any man who can read this inscription and explain its interpretation to me will be clothed with purple, and *have* a necklace of gold around his neck, and have authority as third *ruler* in the kingdom." <sup>8</sup> Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the inscription or make known its interpretation to the king. <sup>9</sup> Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, his face grew *even* paler, and his nobles were perplexed. (Dan 5:7-9 NAS)

The argument here reveals the fact that they saw the letters but just unable to read it out. Goldingay was of the opinion that there is no suggestion that they were in code or written in an odd way, however, they were difficult because of their use of ideograms or their peculiar cuneiform.<sup>17</sup> Some are of the view that it was written in Aramaic but in some strange way or in

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<sup>13</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 30:109.

<sup>14</sup> Archer, "Daniel" *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Ed. Frank E. Gabelein, 7:70–71. Cf.

<sup>15</sup> Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Leila, *The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), 188. Since the writing was done near a lamp, all those present could see it.

<sup>16</sup> The same verb expressive of alarm was used in 4:5, 19 and occurs again here in the queen mother's speech in vs.10. "Thoughts" as in 2:29-30; 4:19; it occurs again in vs. 10; 7:28. The Hebrew equivalent in Eccl. 1:17; 2:22; 4:16 is commonly translated "vexation," so that we are to think of anxious thought. See *The Interpreter's Bible*, 6:424.

<sup>17</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 30:109."the story envisages them written as unpointed consonants: being able to read out unpointed text is partly dependent on actually understanding it, and Daniel later reads the words out one way and interprets them another."

unfamiliar characters; hence, the wise men could make no intelligible sense out of them to convey a message to the monarch.<sup>1</sup> Since Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the empire, so most of the people at the banquet would have been able to read the individual words. Given the size of the reward being offered, it seems incredible that no-one was willing to proffer a reasonable sounding guess.<sup>2</sup>

Zimmermann suggests that this means they could not ‘vocalise’ the words<sup>3</sup>. However, Brewer was of the opinion that the phrase could imply that the hand scratched the wall with its fingers, and that these scratches were interpreted by Daniel as writing.<sup>4</sup> Daniel’s stroke of genius or inspiration seems to have been to convert these marks into numbers and then into the names of the weights these numbers represent; he vocalized the names of the weights as though they were Aramaic words and produced verbal participles.<sup>5</sup> I want to submit by sharing the view

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<sup>1</sup> *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 6:424. Cf. Archer, “Daniel” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 7:71. Opines that perhaps the words, though written in standard Aramaic characters, simply did not convey any intelligible meaning. As quoted by Polaski, “the rabbis suggest any number of alternatives: the words were written from left to right, or vertically from top to bottom, or with letter rearranged (b. Sahn. 22a), however, Albrecht Alt asserts that the inscription was really a set of Aramaic abbreviations, which Babylonian scribes presumably would not have known. Polaski, “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin,” 655.

<sup>2</sup> David Instone Brewer, “Mene Mene Teqel Uparsin: Daniel 5:25 in Cuneiform,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 42, no. 2 (November 1991): 312. However, the text suggests that they could not even read the words, let alone interpret them (Dan. 5:8).

<sup>3</sup> Zimmermann, “The Writing on the Wall: Dan. 5:25 F.,” 206. “The members of the court most likely could read the writing very well. But in the ambiguous meanings of the roots, as well as the different significations and variegated meanings, to say nothing about the perplexing grammatical forms whether they be noun or verb formations, whether passive or active forms of the verb, led to their complete intellectual paralysis. In short, the wise men could not vocalize competently enough to make sense of the passage.”

<sup>4</sup> Brewer, “Mene Mene Teqel Uparsin,” 313. “If a left hand were to scratch a surface with its fingers while it drew itself into a fist, it would leave a series of marks which could be interpreted in cuneiform as numbers. These numbers could be interpreted as ‘Mina, Mina, Shekel and a half’. The marks would be three vertical strokes of the small finger, ring finger and middle finger, followed by a cross made by the vertical of the forefinger being bisected by the horizontal of the thumb - i.e. ‘|||+’. Cuneiform numerals are fairly straight-forward though sometimes ambiguous. A simple vertical stroke normally means ‘one’, though it can sometimes mean ‘60’, which is usually discernable by context.”

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.

of Stefanovic on this issue, “in accordance with the established custom of writing Semitic languages, the words were written only as consonants and possibly with no divisions between them. This means that Daniel could read and explain these four words and what they meant to the king in more than one way”<sup>1</sup>

### **Mene Mene Tekel Parsin**

Failure of the king’s wise men to interpret the revelation reinforces the fundamental message of the Book of Daniel that exalt God’s sovereignty and wisdom to reveal the mysteries of life. The introduction Daniel gave for this four or three words as the case may be, reveal the message behind the divine writing. In verses 22 and 23, fourteen times, Daniel zeroes in on Belshazzar’s responsibility, as a story of accountability and judgment.

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 5:22-23 NAS)

Goldingay put it this way: “You knew, you ignored, you exalted yourself, you desecrated, you committed idolatry, you disregarded.” He emphasizes Belshazzar’s responsibility for his attitudes and actions; he is the subject of a series of strong verbs in vv 22-23.<sup>2</sup> Many commentators has made several allusion to the meaning and interpretation of *mene, mene, teqel, parsin*. “The usual interpretation is that it refers to Nebuchadnezzar who was worth a mina,

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<sup>1</sup> Zdravko Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2007), 198. He said, the challenge for Babylon’s wise men, was not that of giving the dictionary definition of these four words but of disclosing what significance they had for the king.

<sup>2</sup> Goldingay, *Daniel*, 30:115.

Belshazzar who was worth no more than a shekel, and the Medes and the Persians who were half a mina each”<sup>1</sup>. Kraeling refer to it as quality of the kings after Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>2</sup>

Montgomery observed that the words are severally translated as passive participles, to be translated, numbered, weighed, and divided.<sup>3</sup> For the first item numbered there is given the exegesis: God has NUMBERED thy kingdom and transferred it. Involved in the term numbered is the idea of fate and of the destined number of days which have run their course; Again: Weighed art thou in scales and found wanting. For the divine weighing of human conduct; And finally: Thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

According to Wolters, Daniel divides the nine consonants into three units of three letters each, and then proceeds to give an interpretation based on three levels of meaning. However, all three levels are unified by their common reference to the overall image of God judging Babylon on the scales of his justice.<sup>4</sup>

All three units are thematically related in meaning, as we can see in the table below<sup>5</sup>

	Level A	Level B	Level C
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<sup>1</sup> *The Interpreter’s Bible*, 6:432.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Gottlieb Heinrich Kraeling, “The Handwriting on the Wall,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, no. 1 (March 1944): 11–18. Of these there were five, so that the first MENE means Evil-merodach, the second MENE is Neriglissar, both of whom are valued at a mina. TEKEL is the boy-king Labashi-Marduk, who reigned only eight months and so was worth only a shekel, the sixtieth part of a mina. The dual PARSIN represents Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar, each valued at a half mina.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, The International Criticall Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1927), 262–263. Cf. A recent example is Archer, “Daniel” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Ed. Frank E. Gabelein, 7:73.

<sup>4</sup> AL Wolters, “The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 62 (1991): 160.

<sup>5</sup> This table is adapted from Wolters, 172

Vs 26	Mina	Reckoned has God your kingdom	And paid it out
Vs 27	Shekel	Weighed have you been in the scales	And found too light
Vs 28	Half-mina	Assessed has been your kingdom	And given to the Medes and Persians

Each of the three levels is thematically unified: we have three weights on level A, three acts of evaluation on level B, and three references to judgment on level C.<sup>1</sup>

### THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> **And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand**, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god. (Dan 1:1-2 NAS emphasis mine)

The central theme in the Book of Daniel is sovereignty of God! The book of Daniel opens with a report on the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, followed by an important reminder that God was in complete control of this tragic event in Judah's history<sup>2</sup>

The texts above affirm God's control over the heaven and earth, as Psalm 115:2-3 agrees,

Why should the nations say, "Where, now, is their God?"  
But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. (Psa. 115:2-3 NAS)

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<sup>1</sup> Wolters, "The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5," 176. "Furthermore, the central image of God weighing Babylon in the scales of his justice ties the various levels together: level A names the weight-stones which symbolize his standards of justice; level B designates the process of weighing which stands for God's acts of judicial appraisal; and level C describes the outcome of that process in the tipping of the scales and the payment of the silver weighed, representing God's verdict and sentence over Babylon. It is altogether fitting that the explicit mention of weighing on the scales also occurs at the exact center of the nine distinct meanings which we have uncovered."

<sup>2</sup> Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise*, 45.

Against the ancient belief that the stronger god wins the battle, God let go of wayward Judah nation to the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. While Israelites paraded Jerusalem “beautiful in its loftiness, / the joy of the whole earth” (Ps. 48:2), the Babylonians prized Babylon as “the jewels of kingdoms, / the glory of the Babylonians’ pride” (Isa. 13:19). The prophet Habakkuk had written (Hab. 1; 2) that God would use the Chaldeans from Babylon as an instrument to judge his covenant people.<sup>1</sup> By these events God demonstrated that He would not tolerate sin, wherever it was found. He would have turned from His anger, had the people turned to Him. But trust in His temple was no substitute for repentance.<sup>2</sup>

As God demonstrates His control over the kingdoms of the world, He equally share not His glory with other gods. Belshazzar used the confiscated temple goblets in a profane and blasphemous act of disdain for the God of the Jews. He spit in the face of Yahweh to bolster his pride and boast of his Babylonian glory. According to William Shea, the vessels from the temple of Yahweh used at the celebration (Dan 5:3) were probably not the only vessels from foreign temples being used there that night. In drinking from the vessels, he observed, that the king and his courtiers could have been attempting to demonstrate that their god and his new king were superior over all the gods and kings.<sup>3</sup> The king and guests foolishly praised the creation rather than the Creator. Worship the gods of silver and gold. At this moment God was provoked to react.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Olyott, *Dare to Stand Alone: Daniel Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary (Faverdale North, Darling: Evangelical Press, 1982), 16–17. They were sure that, however they lived, the temple would save them. But it had not; it was now in ruins and a pagan king was carrying its treasures into the house of his god, and into his treasury. Cf. the very mention of King Jehoiakim’s name in this verses reminds the reader of someone who dared to cut into pieces and throw into a fire a scroll that contained God’s message to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 36:22-24) Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise*, 48.

<sup>3</sup> William H Shea, “Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20, no. 2 (summer 1982): 142–143.

Sometimes when we are in trial, we cry out loud to people around us than to God. Belshazzar, ordered for his wise men to help him out. However, for the third time in Daniel's book, a Babylonian king faces a serious crisis with wise men who cannot help and thus contribute directly to the bankruptcy of Babylonian astrology.<sup>1</sup> Indeed God show His supremacy by messing the wise men with letters of their *lingua franca*. In referring to pair of scales as image of God's judgment against Babylon, Wolters, observed that the annual rising of Libra took place on the eve of Babylon's fall to the Persians and that Daniel did not only decipher an exceedingly sophisticated verbal riddle, but also turns the tables on the Babylonian astrologers.<sup>2</sup>

The message to which the chapter points is the importance of obedience to the Word of the God who holds in his hand the life of every human being, including world emperors. Key elements that characterized Belshazzar's reign includes pride, blasphemy, inappropriate drinking of wine in the presence of women, and praise to idols. The details of the story in this chapter provide important internal witness to the fact that God's Word can be trusted.

The question remains, why couldn't Belshazzar repented like Nebuchadnezzar? The answer rushed out like water, his time was up! He exalted Marduk above Most High God, and committed debauchery for feasting with women. This was against ancient near east practices, reference to this can be found in Esther 1. This is a lesson for contemporary world who have exalted power, sex, wealth and fame above God.

## CONCLUSION

Daniel chapter 5 is a story of accountability, responsibility, cheer disobedience and lack of reverence to God Almighty. This study suggests that the letters on the wall were not just

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<sup>1</sup> Stefanovic, *Daniel: Wisdom to the Wise* 188.

<sup>2</sup> Wolters, "The Riddle of the Scales in Daniel 5," 155.

visible to all in the hall but also written in Aramaic. When people sneer at God, He does not ignore it. Because He does not act at once, wicked minds conclude that He will not act at all. He weighs up all their mockery and defiance in His balances. Nothing is forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Olyott, *Dare to Stand Alone*, 71.

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