

218—THE HANDWRITING ON THE WALL

(Daniel 5)

It had been sixty-seven years since Daniel and his friends had been brought to Babylon as captives from the land of Judah. Daniel still served in the court of the king, but he was now an old man and few remembered his earlier deeds. King Nebuchadnezzar was long since dead, and a son-in-law named Nabonidus sat on the throne of the Babylonian kingdom. Ruling with Nabonidus was his son Belshazzar, the prince regent and second in command.⁶⁵

Belshazzar made a great feast for 1,000 of the lords of the kingdom, along with their wives and concubines. During the feast he served wine to his guests from the gold and silver vessels that his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar⁶⁶ had extracted from the temple in Jerusalem. And while they drank from these sacred vessels, they praised the false gods that they had made with their own hands.

As Belshazzar's feast progressed, part of a man's hand appeared and wrote with its finger, in an unknown language, on the palace wall. And as Belshazzar looked up, he saw the hand and the writing. So troubling and frightening was this vision to him that the joints of his hips became loose and his knees began to knock together.

Belshazzar called for the wise men of the city to come in and see the writing. "Whoever can give me the interpretation of this strange writing," he promised them, "shall be clothed with scarlet, have a gold chain placed around his neck, and become the third ruler in the kingdom." But none of the wise men of Babylon could tell Belshazzar what the writing meant.

⁶⁵ Note that this story (and other stories in which Belshazzar is mentioned) does not refer to him as the king, even though he is called King Belshazzar in the King James Version of the Bible. As prince regent, he was actually second in authority to his father Nabonidus and shared in the powers of the crown (see story "211—The Babylonian and Persian Empires").

⁶⁶ The scriptural text refers to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's father, but he was really his grandfather. In the Hebrew and Chaldean languages, the same word was used for all male ancestors in the direct line and did not distinguish by generation as we do. (The same was also true of female ancestors.) This story uses *grandfather*, which is the correct relationship.

When the queen⁶⁷ saw Belshazzar's anguish, she said, "Do not let your thoughts trouble you or your countenance be changed because of this strange writing. There is a man in the kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods who, in the days of your grandfather, interpreted dreams and showed forth his understanding. He had the wisdom of the gods in interpreting dreams and dissolving doubts. This man is Daniel, whom the king named Belteshazzar and made him master of the magicians and of all the wise men. Let Daniel be called and he will give you the interpretation."

When Daniel was summoned before Belshazzar, Belshazzar questioned him. "Are you that Daniel who was brought captive from Judah by my grandfather?" asked Belshazzar.

"I am," answered Daniel.

"I have heard that you have the spirit of the gods in you, as well as light, understanding, and excellent wisdom," said Belshazzar. "My wise men have been brought in that they might read this writing that you see on the wall and tell me its meaning, but they could not do it. If you can tell me what this writing means, you shall be clothed with scarlet, a gold chain shall be placed around your neck, and you shall be the third ruler in the kingdom."

"You may keep your gifts and give your rewards to another," answered Daniel, "yet I will read the writing and make known its interpretation.

"The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar a kingdom with majesty, glory, and honor. Because of the majesty that God gave him, all people, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him, for he had the power of life and death over them. But when your grandfather hardened his heart with pride, he was removed from his throne and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among men and his heart made like that of the beast. He dwelt with wild asses, fed on grass like an ox, and his body was wet with dew until he knew that the Most High God rules in the kingdoms of men and appoints whomever he will as their kings.

"And you, O Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart even though you knew all this. You have lifted yourself up against Jehovah and have brought the vessels of his temple before you to be used for the praising of gods that are made by men's hands. You have not glorified that God in whose hands is your very

⁶⁷ It is not clear here whether the queen was Belshazzar's mother or his wife. She seems to have a better memory of Daniel's earlier deeds than does Belshazzar, so it is likely that she is his mother, Nebuchadnezzar's daughter.

breath and who watches over all that you do. Because of your deeds, this hand was sent from him to write upon your wall.

“This is what was written: ‘Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.’

“And this is the interpretation: *Mene* means that God has numbered your kingdom and finished it. *Tekel* means that you are weighed in the balance and found wanting. And *upharsin*⁶⁸ means that your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.”⁶⁹

And when Belshazzar heard Daniel’s interpretation of the writing, he commanded that Daniel should be clothed in scarlet, with a gold chain around his neck, and that he should be made third ruler in the kingdom. But Belshazzar was slain that night when Darius the Mede took the kingdom.

⁶⁸ Verse 27 of Daniel 5 gives the interpretation of the word *peres* rather than *upharsin*. This was changed to give consistency to the story.

⁶⁹ The message was written in Aramaic. A literal translation of *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin* would be “numbered, numbered, weighed, divided.” Though most any one could interpret the words of this message, the inspiration of God was essential for one to understand their meaning.