

Daniel – Chapter 5

The end of the Babylonian Empire

In Chapter 5 we come to the end of the Babylonian empire as it is replaced by a the Medo- Persian empire under Darius.

The History of Babylon

Because Babylon is more than a historical place but also is important prophetically in the book of Daniel and also in Revelation I deem it important in our study here to spend a little time to review its history and symbology.

- *First mention in Bible*

The piece of real estate where the events we are studying takes place is first mentioned in Genesis under the name of Assyria, today in the country of Iraq.

- *Babylon prominent in Scripture*

References to Babylon occur over 300 times in the Bible and it is mentioned 3 times in Christ's genealogy. (Matt 1:11,17) Israel's exile in Babylon is placed as a milestone or marker in the genealogy of Jesus.

- *The first world ruler*

Nimrod was a rebel against God and the first military dictator. Nimrod built the famous Tower of Babel as the centerpiece of his rebellion against God. ("Bav" = gate; "El" = God. Babel = "Gateway to the gods"). This was the beginning of the city of Babylon. This ziggurat was later rebuilt by Nebuchadnezzar as Etemenanki, and it was then called "the building which is the foundation of heaven and earth."

- *God intervenes the first time*

God disrupted this rebellious coalition through the "confusion of tongues" in Genesis 11. This rebellion against God is still with us. It was the first and judgment of God to fall on Babylon but there are others including the final destruction yet to come.

- *Babylon still with us*

The residuals from Babylon include most of the traditions of idol worship, astrology, and the occult that continue to the present day. Babylon is the physical representation of the spirit of pride of mankind and the drive for independence from the rightful ruler-ship of God over man.

- *Zodiac corrupted*

For example, the original Biblical significance of the zodiac (or "Mazzeroth") was corrupted by the Babylonian religious system and the same corrupt system continues in all cultures to this day.

- *Abraham battles 9 kings*

Babylon surfaces next in biblical history in its involvement with Abraham. In Genesis 14 we find Abraham's dramatic rescue of his nephew Lot in the Battle of the Nine Kings. There were four attacking kings from southern Mesopotamia who defeated five kings of the plain. The four kings had, for 12 years, been under the leadership of Kedorlaomer, the King of Elam. In the list which introduces these kings in Genesis 14:1, the one mentioned first is Amraphel, King of Shinar (Babylon), one of the lesser kings at the time.

Genesis 14:1 At this time Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Kedorlaomer king of Elam and Tidal king of Goiim

- *Babylon and Jerusalem*

Also in Genesis 14, after Abraham's stunning victory, we encounter a mysterious character Melchizedek, King of Salem (Ps 110; Heb 5, 7, etc.), a location later to be known as Jerusalem (Ps 76:1,2; 2 Sam 18:18). This begins an antithetical relationship between Jerusalem and Babylon that climaxes with the destruction of Babylon in the "Day of Lord" (Revelation 16 - 19) and with the presentation of the "New Jerusalem" in Revelation 21.

- *Assyria rules until about 700BC*

Assyria rose to power in the second millennium B.C. Various early kings appointed governors over the city of Babylon before the Amorite invasion led to the founding of the first Semitic dynasty of Babylon under Sumu-abum (1894 B.C.). The sixth king of the line, Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.) enlarged the city and made it a prosperous capital and trading center. Hammurabi and his son, Samsu-iluna, reigned from 1749 to 1712 B.C. It was during this period that the nation Israel was living in Egypt.

- *Legal concepts still with us*

Some of the code of Hammurabi, the legal and court system he developed is embodied in derivative forms still today in our courts and legal procedures as it was passed down to us from the Romans.

- *Captured by the Hittites*

Babylon was captured by the Hittites, (1595 B.C.) and then the subsequently occupied by the Kassites who ruled for some 400 years. During the first millennium B.C., Babylon endured as a minor tribal center, and as a mere pawn of Assyrian politics.

- *The Rise of Nebuchadnezzar*

In 627 B.C. a governor of the Sealand (modern Kuwait), Nabopolassar, rallied the tribes and broke out from besieged Erech and cleared Babylon from the Assyrians for the last time. Six weeks later the people of Babylon invited Nabopolassar to be their king. Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar, used the city as a base from which he marched on many campaigns to Syria and Palestine. He was destined to bring in the Chaldean dynasty's finest hours and Babylon's most famous period.

- *Defeat of Assyria and Egypt*

In 612 B.C. the combined forces of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians attacked and destroyed the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The only remaining power of significance was the Egyptians. The Babylonian Chronicle records the defeat of Pharaoh Necco and the Egyptians at the famous battle at Carchemish and after that the then-known world was under Babylonian rule.

- *Jerusalem conquered*

In 606 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar succeeded in his siege of Jerusalem and Jehoiakim of Judah became his vassal. Jehoiakim would also revolt three years later, 2 Kings 24:1; Dan 1:1,2. Nebuchadnezzar's first expedition was before he ascended to the throne; Nebuchadnezzar's first year was concurrent with Jehoiakim's fourth year, Jeremiah 25:1

- *70 year captivity begins*

This initiated a 70-year period known Biblically as the "servitude of the nation." It was in this first siege that Daniel and his three friends were deported as teenagers to be educated there and to serve at the Babylonian court. These "hostages" might help assure the continued loyalty of the vassal king in Jerusalem. Despite Jeremiah's warnings, Jehoiakim rebelled three years later after the Egyptians had beaten the Babylonian army in open battle. Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem a second time, seized Jehoiakim, and appointed a king of his own choice, Zedekiah; 2 Kings 25:1; Jer 39:1; 52:4; Ezek24:1.

- *Another deportation*

The capture of Jehoiachin and his substitution by a Babylonian nominee, Mattaniah-Zedekiah, accords with the Biblical accounts of the same events. 2 Kings 24:10-17; 2 Chronicles 36:5-10; Jeremiah 37:1. Skilled craftsmen from Judah were deported to assist the immense building program then current at Babylon, where in Esagalia and other temples the spoils of war were dedicated to be displayed on state occasions; 2 Chronicles 36:7; Daniel 5:3. Tablets from the vaulted rooms by the Ishtar Gate include four listing of the rations given to “Yau’kin of Judah.” Five sons of Jehoichin are also mentioned as well as five carpenters from Judah, presumably captives from the siege of Jerusalem.

- *Third rebellion and destruction of Jerusalem*

Again, despite Jeremiah’s repeated warnings, Zedekiah also rebelled, which led to the third and final siege by Nebuchadnezzar, and the complete destruction of Jerusalem. This initiates the period known as the “desolations of Jerusalem” that also lasted exactly 70 years. Many commentators make the mistake of treating the “servitude of the nation” and the “desolations of Jerusalem” as synonyms since they both were predicted to be 70 years in duration. The “desolations of Jerusalem” was a punishment for not yielding to the “servitude.” Jeremiah 27:6, 8, 11; 38:17-21; Jeremiah 29:10, Daniel 9:2.

- *Slow decay of the Babylonian empire*

Nebuchadnezzar’s death was followed by a steady weakening of the regime. His successor, Amel-Marduk (“Evil-Merodach” of 2 Kings 25:27; Jeremiah 52:31), ruled but two years and was replaced in 560 B.C. after an army coup by the commander in chief, Neriglissar (Nergal-Sharezer of Jeremiah 39:3), son-in-law of Nebuchadnezzar. After frequent absences from active service, he was, in turn, ousted, and his weak son Labashi-Marduk lasted only a few months before another coup d’etat brought Nabonidus to the throne.

- *Belshazzar left in charge*

Soon after his power-grab, Nabonidus led the army to Palestine and Northern Arabia, leaving his son Belshazzar as co-regent in Babylon. Nabonidus’ decision to stay in Arabia resulted from his unpopularity at home as much as from his desire to found a settlement there with exiles from Palestine.

- *Rampant inflation makes for famine*

In Babylon there had been inflation brought on both by the continuing military expenditure and by the extensive program of public works begun by Nebuchadnezzar. This inflation rate amounted to 50% between 560 B.C. and 530 B.C., resulting in widespread famine. In the last year of Nabonidus, the Babylon Chronicle records that many idols of the cities around Babylon, were brought in, an action taken only at the sign of impending war.

- *Inscriptions bear Belshazzar and Daniel's name*

A cylinder, one of 4 bearing the same text found at the four corners of the ziggurat at Ur, is inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform: prayer to the moon-god Sin, to whom the Ziggurat is consecrated; mentions “Belshazzar, the son first born, the offspring of my heart.” Inscriptions designate Daniel as “the 3rd Ruler in the kingdom.”

The End of the Babylonian Empire

- *Time of chapter 5 of Daniel*

After our excursion into Babylonian history we come to the time and events of Chapter 5 in the book of Daniel.

Daniel 5:1 King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them.

Daniel 5:2 While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them.

- *Partytime*

Belshazzar was arrogant in the face of the fact that there were foreign armies outside of the walls of Babylon. Unbeknownst to him the conquering Persians had taken control of the canal system many miles away from the city. These canals were used for irrigation, flood control and to supply the city of Babylon with water for defense and drinking. He put his faith upon the immense fortifications surrounding the city. So to show his contempt for the enemy he felt safe and smug to have a big party.

Daniel 5:3 So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them.

Daniel 5:4 As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

- *No regard for other religions*

Belshazzar in contrast to his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar as well as the conquering Medes and Persians did not respect other religions and what these held sacred.

- *A cloud on the festivity*

Daniel 5:5 Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote.

At the height of the festivity a disembodied hand started to write a strange message on the wall right next to the lampstands so would not be missed. Notice that there is no mention of any kind of a writing instrument, but it appears as if the fingers were writing, perhaps engraving the message into the wall.

- *The king has the s**t scared out of him*

Daniel 5:6 (KJV) Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another.

Daniel 5:6 (NIV) His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way.

The phrase "joints of his loins were loosed" in the King James version literally means that he lost control over his bowels.

- *Promises instead of threat*

Daniel 5:7 The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

Unlike his grandfather, Belshazzar offers a reward rather than punishment. The highest promise he can make is to give the 3rd place in the kingdom because he was only in 2nd place. His father, Nabonidus had put him in charge while he was off with his army on a campaign in Arabia.

- *The educated elite strikes out again*

Daniel 5:8 Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant.

As usual the intellectuals and educated elite of the day could not help the king this time either.

- *A truly frightened king*

Daniel 5:9 So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

Instinctively the king may have known that the message of the writing was not good and that's why he's so terribly afraid.

- *Enter the queen*

Daniel 5:10 The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!

Daniel 5:11 There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father--your father the king, I say--appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners.

Daniel 5:12 This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

It is most probable that this queen referred to is really the Queen Mother, the widow of Nebuchadnezzar, who would of course have never forgotten Daniel's dealings with her late husband.

- *Enter the aged Daniel*

Daniel 5:13 So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?

Daniel 5:14 I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom.

Daniel 5:15 The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it.

Daniel 5:16 Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

At this time Daniel would be in his late eighties and most likely retired from active service in Government. In this emergency the aged senior statesman is once again called on to perform a service that no one else can do.

The word father here does not necessarily mean the direct progenitor, in the sense that we mostly use it today, but it was used to denote an ancestor, in this case the grandfather. It is used in the sense that Abraham was the father of David.

- *Daniel shows no deference to king*

Daniel does not show much deference to the king, but reads him the riot act as it were, because he knows that the king's life will be over this evening.

Daniel 5:17 Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means.

Daniel 5:18 "O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor.

Daniel 5:19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled.

Daniel 5:20 But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.

Daniel 5:21 He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.

Daniel 5:22 "But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.

Daniel 5:23 Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways.

Daniel 5:24 Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

- *Do we learn from history?*

Daniel gives the king a quick review of Chapter 4 and in effect tells him you should have known better than to do what you're doing tonight. But as is so often the case, the king did not learn anything from history and that is, sad to say, true also of our generation.

- *Daniel knew the end*

Some might say, that Daniel was very bold because he knew the end and so he told the king the unvarnished truth. But then, we also know the truth and the end and so we ought to be bold and proclaim it without fear.

- *Daniel reads the message*

Daniel 5:25 "This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

In contrast to the wise men, Daniel was able to read the message. According to the Talmud, the writing was in Aramaic, but it was written vertically and as a mirror image and as was standard, the vowels were omitted.

- *Daniel says "your number is up"*

Daniel 5:26 "This is what these words mean: {Mene} : God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

- *The king gets an "F"*

Daniel 5:27 {Tekel} : You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

Daniel tells the king that God has given him a report card and it contains only one grade, a big red F.

- *Divided empire*

Daniel 5:28 {Peres} : Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

In verse 25 we have a transliteration, not a translation of an Aramaic word in singular form and in verse 28 it is used in the plural form. The word PERES with the "e" means divided, but if an "a" is substituted as in PARAS it becomes the word for Persians. So the inscription in effect says "Numbered, Numbered, Weighed, Divided"

- *Belshazzar didn't get the message*

Daniel 5:29 Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

Daniel 5:30 That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain,

- *The enemy is within the gates*

While all this was going on, the water level in the protective moat and in the river flowing through the city was steadily dropping until the invaders could march into the city and take it without a fight.

- *Belshazzar slain*

On the 12th of October of 539 BC Belshazzar was executed by the invading troops. Many residents of the city did not even know that they had been conquered for three whole days. 16 days later Cyrus makes his grand entry into the city of Babylon.

- *The Babylonian empire ends*

Daniel 5:31 and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

Now, for the next 200 years begins the rule of the Persian Empire as represented by the silver in Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

- *Nimrod the proud rebel founds Babel*

Nimrod, the founder of a city called Babel (Gen11) tries to make himself great and God, as always comes against pride, thwarts the plan of the arrogant. In contrast, in the next chapter of Genesis (Gen12) God proceeds to make Abraham great because he was humble and showed this by being obedient by faith and was thus exalted as the example of faith and the channel of blessing to all people of faith.

- *Common everyday sayings*

It is interesting how many sayings often used in our language come from the book of Daniel. Such phrases as "I've seen the handwriting on the wall" or "the idol has clay feet" or "his days are numbered" or "his number is up" or "he was weighed and found wanting" are all echoes of the book of Daniel.

- *Babylon fell -- but not destroyed*

The Bible speaks here of the fall of Babylon, but in later passages of Daniel, as well in other prophetic passages of the destruction and it is important keep these events separate. Failure to do so has caused much confusion for those attempting to make sense of a number prophetic scriptures. Many commentators and references will treat the fall and destruction of Babylon as synonyms, but they are two distinct events in history, much of which is still future to our time.

- *Alexander the Great makes Babylon his capital*

After about two centuries of Persian rule, Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C), a Greek, captures Babylon and makes it his headquarters. On June 13 323 BC after a life of only 33 years dies there. The real estate we call Afghanistan, much in the news today, was also subject to Alexander.

- *A church in Babylon?*

It appears that in New Testament times Babylon was certainly inhabited and Peter sends greetings from "her", and the KJV uses the word "church" in brackets.

1Peter 5:13 The [church that is] at Babylon, elected together with [you], saluteth you; and [so doth] Marcus my son.

1 Peter 5:13 She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark.

- *Babylon gradually decays away*

Through the centuries Babylon gradually crumbles, but is always inhabited. As recently as the 1800's the town of Hillah, containing over 10,000 inhabitants, stood on the site of ancient Babylon. In the late

nineteenth century, the German archeologist Robert Koldewey conducted extensive studies at Babylon and the four Arab villages situated on the site. Babylon had been continuously inhabited before his arrival.

- *Prophecies of the destruction of Babylon*

The great prophecies concerning the city of Babylon in Isaiah chapters 13 and 14 and Jeremiah 50 and 51 have never been fulfilled. Read these chapters as well as Revelation 17 and 18 all in one session. We will consider some of this later in our study in the book of Daniel.

- *Will Babylon rise again?*

From our present perspective in time, the material in these prophetic passages seems to have caused many scholars to apply mostly symbolic and spiritual meaning to these texts. Reading them together however, and noting the many references to geographic locations and nations makes a literal fulfillment of a destruction of a physical real city of Babylon likely in the future.

- *A literal Babylon in the future?*

Many of the passages in scripture concerning the future of Babylon seem quite literal, although the Babylonian system as it represents the pride of man and his striving to be independent of God is present all over the world including in our country and culture. Today's world system, its financial systems, roots of sciences such as astronomy and measurement, religious systems of idol worship and authoritarian governments all trace back to ancient Babylon. For example, the fertility idol called Ishtar in Daniel's time we call Easter today.

- *Does man's rebellion begin and end in the land of Babylon?*

Will this city re-emerge at the end of history as a major political, economic and religious center perhaps also with some sort of connections to the city of Rome? Many members of the Babylonian priesthood came to Rome and their teachings and practices were modified and incorporated into the Roman Church. Will Babylon represent the eastern leg of the iron empire and the city of Rome the western leg? The Garden of Eden was there and the beginning of human history in its rebellion against the rightful rule of God started right there in the land of Babylon and it appears likely that God will end that rebellion right where it began and extend the judgment to the whole planet.

- *The ancient city of Babylon is being rebuilt today*

The country of Iraq has been excavating and rebuilding Babylon for the last 20 years mostly in the interest of history. Saddam Hussein fancied himself as Nebuchadnezzar's successor dreaming to rebuild the glory of the Babylonian empire. While at the present time the city of Babylon is still only of historical interest, it may yet in the future become of much greater importance. It is located about 100 kilometers (62 miles) south of Baghdad.

- *Daniel was told the outcome of history*

Even though Belshazzar was king and had authority to reward or punish, Daniel knew the outcome and was bold to proclaim the truth to the king who seemingly did not understand the message Daniel brought him. It has been said that of course Daniel knew what is going to happen and so he could be bold in proclaiming the truth.

- *Only on thing truly certain*

However, that is also true of us. God has also, in His word told us the outcome of history – which is really HIS STORY – that Jesus will return and that because He lives, we will also live and that there is only one thing that is totally certain:

Romans 8:38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

Romans 8:39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- *We too must be unafraid to proclaim the Truth*

A common saying is that the only sure things are death and taxes, but there are some who pay no taxes. Enoch and Elijah did not see death and there will be a group of believers who won't see death at the return of the Lord. In view of all this, we too ought to be bold, as was Daniel, in standing for truth and proclaiming it faithfully.