

CHAPTER 5

Context

This chapter is paired with chapter 4: together they comprise the centre of the Aramaic section of the book. The time span and transition from Nebuchadnezzar has been omitted. This serves the purpose of the section by compressing the account of these two kings, juxtaposing their differing responses to revelation of God's rule.

Purpose

Following chapter 4, this chapter serves as both a warning and a challenge. Rather than conversion and praise, there will be those who are stubbornly unrepentant, not heeding God's gracious revelation of his sovereignty. There is encouragement for God's people that he will weigh and judge the unrepentant, but also a reminder that God expects and wants individuals to whom he reveals himself to move toward him in repentance, not away in defiant rebellion. Therefore: Take personal accountability to the sovereign God seriously -in comfort and warning.

Structure

5:1-12: A hand from God interrupts the king's rebellion

5:13-30: A man from God interprets and indicts the king's rebellion

Notes on the Text

5:1-12: Verses 1-4 set the scene and highlights the issue. King Belshazzar is in defiance of God and his kingdom. The focus is on the drinking at the feast ("drank wine," 4:1; "so... they might drink", 4:2; "and... drank" 4:2; "as they drank", 4:4). This paints a picture of decadence and debauchery. The point is that this revelry is deliberately pointed and scorning of God. Here, the articles taken from God's temple that we read about in chapter 1 reappear. We're twice reminded in 1:2 that these were taken from God's temple to the temple of Nebuchadnezzar's god.

From being appropriated for their own gods, Belshazzar now appropriates God's treasure for his own enjoyment. What was meant to be in service to God, is now used for Belshazzar himself, to assert his superiority over God's. This enjoyment is attributed to the false gods, of gold, silver, iron etc.

In 5:5, this rebellion is interrupted, and judgement (we later see) is pronounced. The finger of a human hand appears (we don't know until 5:24 that it was sent by God). This hints at God's human-like agency intervening as with the furnace in chapter 3. It's possible that the wording of the following verses that mention the reward (5:7-9) and the description of Daniel (5:10-12) are inversely repeated (Daniel: 5:14-16a; Reward: 16b-17) to contribute to an A-B-B-A structure (also framed by the inscription event and interpretation of it either side). This would suggest 5:13 as a turning point in the middle.

5:13-30: This flow to the narrative suggests that Daniel's role is a pivot in the story. Daniel effectively brings a prophetic word from God that convicts the king and pronounces God's judgment. Daniel as God's agent here is not central to the story, but is instrumental to it, in revealing God's verdict. Daniel is not interested in reward (5:17), and it would be an empty reward anyway, with the imminent fall of the kingdom. 5:18-21 recounts the rebellion and humbling of Nebuchadnezzar, king Belshazzar's "father."

Scholars debate the nature of this father-son relationship. Archeological findings show that Belshazzar's actual father was a ruler called Nabonidus - a

general who had taken the throne after the assassination of Nebuchadnezzar's son (who is mentioned in 2 Kings 25:27). Extra-biblical sources tell us that, whilst absent from the kingdom, Nabonidus appointed Belshazzar as crown prince, the de facto king. (Clarifying why he can only offer third place in the kingdom, as his father and he were first and second, respectively). If this is the case, then 'father' here means descendent, highlighting monarchical succession. It is also possible that the queen mother (i.e. Nabonidus's wife) in 5:10 is Nebuchadnezzar's daughter, meaning he could be Belshazzar's grandfather. Either option is within the legitimate semantic range of the word rendered 'father' (as highlighted by the NIV footnote).

Either way, the point of 5:22 is to directly contrast the two kings. Belshazzar has not learnt the lesson from history, nor learnt from Nebuchadnezzar. In these verses Daniel 'interprets' the king's life, before interpreting the word from God. 5:22-23 are the heart of the indictment against the king: he has not humbled himself before God; he has set himself up against God. The root of this is that he has "not honoured the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways." This paves the way for the punishment. God is sovereign here over life itself and all the king's ways. This

means God is concerned for everything the king does. God's personal involvement is seen with his "hand," highlighted here in close proximity to the "hand" that was sent (5:24) - perhaps hinting again at a human-like intervention of God's kingdom. The inscription itself highlights two punishments -the end of the king (Mene) and the end of the kingdom (Peres). Between them is the central basis for this punishment (Tekel). 5:27 suggests a personal accounting before God. There are a few implications here: this gentile king is still accountable to the God of the Jews because he is the Most High, the God of heaven; God has personal interest and knowledge of all the king's ways - no part of life escapes God's notice; this weighing of scales suggests a standard or expectation that has not been met: the king has been found to be lacking. In light of 5:18-21 we can see he has not responded and acted according to what he knew of God. He is without excuse. God's judgment therefore, is his personal and utterly just intervention.

This judgment was enacted that very night. Belshazzar was slain and the kingdom was (more literally) "received" by Darius of the Medo-Persian Empire (the chest and arms of silver from 2:32). As with the original Babel-rebellion, hearts that are set up against God are

judged by a language confusion and division.

Implications

As the king's response in 5:6 shows, the intervention of God on account of wanton rebellion against him is a fearful thing. Everyone - even the world's most powerful - is personally accountable to God. There is no excuse: God acts according to the revelation of himself. Romans 1:18 reminds us that we all know God and he weighs each of our lives. How do we respond to what we personally know of God? Everything we have has come from him, even Belshazzar's power and plentiful food is of God, but what was meant for the praise of God is used in praise of worthless idols of iron and stone. This response to God is an alternative to chapter 4: we are to see that it's possible to know of the mighty works of God, and witness the testimony of right response, to enjoy the life he gives and yet - though knowing all this- to oppose him (5:22).

Such people will be found wanting. In response, God interrupts, breaking in to bring a word to a pagan world, for his people to boldly proclaim. Here, we see Daniel speak truth to power. Those who oppose God are to know he is the king of kings who holds

the life of all in his hand, and to respond like Nebuchadnezzar, not Belshazzar.

The opportunity to repent in this situation is at the heart of the gospel. As the Apostle Paul says: "We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." (Acts 14:16-17).

In these last days, God has again intervened with a message - in Jesus, the man he has sent. There is a public verdict of judgement that calls for repentance and belief - the writing is on the wall for those willing to listen. Are we willing to be those 'brought in' to witness to God's final Word? Will we take heart that godless rule will be held accountable if the message is rejected? Despite the appearance of pagan success, the open mocking of God and those setting themselves up against him - God is aware, God weighs it up, God judges.

Daniel 5 in the Academy

God humbled Nebuchadnezzar for his good, but in chapter 5 he humbles Belshazzar as he receives the just consequences. In the last chapter, Nebuchadnezzar was judged in accordance to what he knew of God. Despite God's revelation to him of warning and Daniel's call to repentance, he initially continues to reject God. Whilst the LORD was persistent in restoring Nebuchadnezzar, this was an act of grace. What we see in this chapter is an act of justice. In the actions of Belshazzar, there is also a hint of deeper rejection in his purposeful perversion of God's temple artefacts.

The use of the Lord's own possessions for the express purpose of idolatry is paradigmatic of all idolatry. God is the owner and giver of all good things that should be dedicated to him, whether gold goblets, sharp academic minds or research funding. This is a stark warning for those in direct opposition to God as Belshazzar was (not just agnostic or unbelieving). With the decline of Western understanding and appreciation for the Christian foundations of modern academia and practice, could this be true in the academy? Are there ways in which university culture provocatively lifts itself

against God and his ways? Through God's revelation in Daniel's life, we have a direct insight into how God views such action. Whilst Belshazzar was blind to God's verdict and needed Daniel to interpret it, we too may have a greater insight into the reality of a world that lifts itself against God. We see this clearly in opposition to Jesus Christ, who is the king of the kingdom revealed throughout the book of Daniel. Like Belshazzar, those in positions of power today are pictured well in Psalm 2:

*The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his
anointed, saying,
"Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
"I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain."*

Discussion Questions

Interpretation Questions

- How might the implications of verse 22 help us think about the place of faith/belief systems and the knowledge of God in academia? Do you recognise the attitude of v22 in your own field of work?

In verse 27, the king's actions are weighed up against what he knew of God and his standing before God and is "found wanting." He has fallen far short. How does the cross encourage us as we reflect on Belshazzar's fate?

Application Questions

- Belshazzar is judged according to what he knows about God's ways in the world, and he has ignored them. How much more do we know, having the gospels and revelation of Jesus as part of our history? How might this be a warning to our own conduct? Jesus reminds us that "to him whom has been given much, much will be expected." Do we act toward God in relation to what we know about him and his action in salvation?

- In recounting the redemption of Nebuchadnezzar, this chapter is a reminder that it is a rejection of God's salvific work that is in view. When many reject the 'idea of God,' what they are really rejecting is Jesus and the scandal of the cross. How might this change how we interact with people who simply reject the idea of a God? This is a chapter about being humbled, yet academia can be notoriously proud of itself, its achievements and significance in the world. How might you seek to avoid this in your own practice?