Adam Clarke Commentary Daniel 5

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Introduction
In the commencement of this chapter we are informed how Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, when rioting in his palace, and profaning the severed vessels of the temple, Daniel 5:1-4, was suddenly terrified with the appearance of the fingers of a manâ€˜s hand, which wrote a few words on the wall before him, Daniel 5:5, Daniel 5:6. The wise men and astrologers were immediately called in to show the king the interpretation; but they could not so much as read the writing, because (as Houbigant and others have conjectured) though the words are in the Chaldee tongue, yet they were written in the Samaritan or ancient Hebrew characters, with which the wise men of Babylon were very probably unacquainted, as the Jews were at that time a despised people, and the knowledge of their language not a fashionable attainment, Daniel 5:7-9. Daniel, who had been so highly esteemed by Nebuchadnezzar for his superior wisdom, appears to have been altogether unknown to Belshazzar, till the queen (the same who had been the wife of Nebuchadnezzar according to the general opinion, or the queen consort according to others) had informed him, Daniel 5:10-12. Upon the queenâ€˜s recommendation, Daniel is called in, Daniel 5:13-16; who boldly tells this despotic king, that as he had not benefited by the judgments inflicted on his grandfather, but gave himself up to pride and profanity, and had added to his other sins an utter contempt for the God of the Jews by drinking wine out of the sacred vessels of Jehovah in honor of his idols, Daniel 5:17-23; the Supreme Being, the Ruler of heaven and earth, had written his condemnation in three words, Mene, Tekel, Peres, Daniel 5:24, Daniel 5:25; the first of which is repeated in the copies containing the Chaldean original; but all the ancient Versions, except the Syriac, are without this repetition. Daniel then gives the king and his lords the fearful import of the writing, viz., that the period allotted for the duration of the Chaldean empire was now completed, (see Jeremiah 25:12-14), and that the kingdom was about to be transferred to the Medes and Persians, Daniel 5:26-28. However unwelcome such an interpretation must have been to Belshazzar, yet the monarch, overwhelmed with its clearness and certainty, commanded the prophet to be honored, Daniel 5:29. And that very night the prediction was fulfilled, for the king was slain, Daniel 5:30, and the city taken by the Medes and Persians, Daniel 5:31. This great event was also predicted by Isaiah and Jeremiah; and the manner in which it was accomplished is recorded by Herodotus and Xenophon.

Verse 1
Belshazzar the king made a great feast - This chapter is out of its place, and should come in after the seventh and eighth. There are difficulties in the chronology. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-merodach his son ascended the throne of Babylon. Having reigned about two years, he was slain by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar. He reigned four years, and was succeeded by his son Laborosoarchod, who reigned only nine months. At his death Belshazzar the son of Evil-merodach, was raised to the throne, and reigned seventeen years, and was slain, as we read here, by Cyrus, who surprised and took the city on the night of this festivity. This is the chronology on which Archbishop Usher, and other learned chronologists, agree; but the Scripture mentions only Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-merodach, and Belshazzar, by name; and Jeremiah, Jeremiah 27:7, expressly says, â€œAll nations shall serve him (Nebuchadnezzar), and his son (Evil-merodach), and his sonâ€˜s son (Belshazzar), until the very time of his land come;â€• i.e., till the time in which the empire should be seized by Cyrus. Here there is no mention of Neriglissar nor Laborosoarchod; but as they were usurpers, they might have been purposely passed by. But there remains one difficulty still: Belshazzar is expressly called the son of Nebuchadnezzar by the queen mother, Jeremiah 27:11: â€œThere is a man in thy kingdom, in whom is the spirit of the holy gods: and in the days of Thy Father light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, was found in him: whom the king Nebuchadnezzar Thy Father, the king, I say, thy father, made master of the magicians.â€• The solution of this difficulty is, that in Scripture the name of son is indifferently given to sons and grandsons, and even to great grandsons. And perhaps the repetition in the above verse may imply this: â€œThe king, Nebuchadnezzar thy father, the king thy father.â€• The king thy fatherâ€˜s father, and consequently thy grandfather. If it have not some such meaning as this, it must be considered an idle repetition. As to the two other kings, Neriglissar and Laborosoarchod, mentioned by Josephus and Berosus, and by whom the chronology is so much puzzled, they might have been some petty kings, or viceroys, or satraps, who affected the kingdom, and produced disturbances, one for four years, and the other for nine months; and would in consequence not be acknowledged in the Babylonish chronology, nor by the sacred writers, any more than finally unsuccessful rebels are numbered among the kings of those nations which they have disturbed. I believe the only sovereigns we can acknowledge here are the following:

1.Nabopolassar;

2.Nebuchadnezzar;
3.Evil-merodach

4.Belshazzar; and with this last the Chaldean empire ended.

To a thousand of his lords - Perhaps this means lords or satraps, that were each over one thousand men. But we learn from antiquity that the Persian kings were very profuse in their entertainments; but it does not follow that the Chaldeans were so too. Besides, one thousand lords and their appropriate attendants would have been very inconvenient in a nocturnal assembly. The text, however, supports the common translation. Literally, â€œBelshazzar the king made bread for his lords a thousand; and against the thousand he drank wine.â€• That is, say some, he was a very great drinker.

Verse 2
Whiles he tasted the wine - He relished it, got heated by it, and when Wine got fully in, Wit went wholly out; and in consequence he acted the profane part of which we immediately read.

Verse 4
And praised the gods of gold - They had gods of all sorts, and of all metals; with wooden gods, and stone gods, beside!

Verse 5
Fingers of a manâ€˜s hand - The fingers were collected about the style or pen as in the act of writing.

Verse 6
The kingâ€˜s countenance was changed - Here is a very natural description of fear and terror.

1.The face grows pale;

2.The mind becomes greatly agitated;
3.Pains seize on the lower part of the back and kidneys;
4.A universal tremor takes place, so that the knees smite against each other;

5.And lastly, either a syncope takes place, or the cry of distress is uttered, Daniel 5:7: â€œThe king cried.â€•

Verse 7
Whosoever shall read this writing - He knew it must be some awful portent, and wished to know what.

Verse 8
They could not read the writing - Because it was in the pure Hebrew, not the Chaldean character. See below.

Verse 10
The queen - came - This is generally allowed to have been the widow of Nebuchadnezzar; if so, she was the queen Amiyt, daughter of Astyages, sister of Darius the Mede, and aunt of Cyrus, according to Polyhistor, cited by Cedrenus. See Calmet. Others think that Nitocris was the person who is said to be queen when Cyrus took the city; and is stated to have been a lady of eminent wisdom and discretion, and to have had the chief direction of the public affairs. She was the mother of Labynithus; and, if this be the same as Belshazzar, she must be the person here introduced.

Verse 11
Nebuchadnezzar thy father - See the note on Daniel 5:1 (note).

Verse 16
Dissolve doubts - Untie knots - unbind what is bound. An expression used in the east to signify a judge of eminent wisdom and skill.

Verse 17
Let thy gifts be to thyself - They could be of little use to any, as the city was in a few hours to be taken and pillaged.

Verse 18
Nebuchadnezzar thy father - Or grandfather, as the margin reads, Daniel 5:2. See the notes on Daniel 5:1 (note).

Verse 19
Whom he would he slew - The genuine character of a despot, whose will is the only rule of his conduct.

Verse 20
He was deposed from his kingly throne - Became insane; and the reins of government were taken out of his hands.

Verse 22
Hast not humbled thine heart - These judgments and mercies have had no good effect upon thee.

Verse 23
But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord - And the highest evidence of this rebellion was, the profaning the sacred vessels of the Lordâ€˜s house.

Verse 24
Then was the part of the hand sent - This was the filling up of the cup of thy iniquity; this last act made thee ripe for destruction.

Verse 25
And this is the writing - Had the words been written in the Chaldean character, every wise man there, every one that could read the alphabet of his own language, could have read and interpreted them. Let it be observed, -

1.That the character which we now call Hebrew is the Chaldean character.

2.That the true Hebrew character is that which we call the Samaritan.
3.Daniel could easily read this, for it was the character used by the Jews previously to the Babylonish captivity.

4.It appears that it was simply on account of the strangeness of the character that the Chaldeans could not read it.

I shall set down the words in both characters, by which the least learned reader may see that it was quite possible that one might be well known, while the other might be unintelligible.
In ancient times, no doubt, these letters differed more from each other than they appear to do now; for we know that the Samaritan on ancient coins, though radically the same, differs very much from that now used in printing.
It should be observed, that each word stands for a short sentence; ×ž× ×• (mene) signifies Numeration; ×ª×§×œ (tekel), Weighing; and ×¤×¨×© (peres), Division. And so the Arabic translates them (mokeeson), measured; (mewzonon), weighed; (mokesoomon), divided. All the ancient Versions, except the Syriac, read the words simply Mene, Tekel, Phares, as they are explained in the following verses; without the repetition of Mene, and without the conjunction ×• (vau) and plural termination, ×™×Ÿ (in), in Peres.

Verse 29
Clothed Daniel with scarlet - ×•×¨×’×•× ×• (argevana), more probably with purple. The gold chain about the neck was an emblem of magisterial authority. It is often thus mentioned in Scripture.

Verse 30
In that night was Belshazzar - slain - Xenophon says, he was dispatched by two lords, Gadatas and Gobrias, who went over to Cyrus, to avenge themselves of certain wrongs which Belshazzar had done them. We have already seen that Cyrus entered the city by the bed of the Euphrates, which he had emptied, by cutting a channel for the waters, and directing them into the marshy country.

Verse 31
Darius the Median took the kingdom - This is supposed to be the same as Cyaxares, son of Astyages and maternal uncle of Cyrus, to whom he gave the throne of Babylon, after himself had had the honor of taking the city.
Daniel speaks nothing of the war that raged between the Babylonians and the Medes; but Isaiah speaks particularly of it, chap. 13, 14, 45, Isaiah 46:1-13, Isaiah 47:1-15.; and so does Jeremiah, chap. 50, 51. I need not add, that it is largely spoken of by profane authors. The Medes and Persians were confederates in the war; the former under Darius, the latter under Cyrus. Both princes are supposed to have been present at the taking of this city. Mandane, daughter of Astyages, was mother of Cyrus, and sister to Cyaxares.