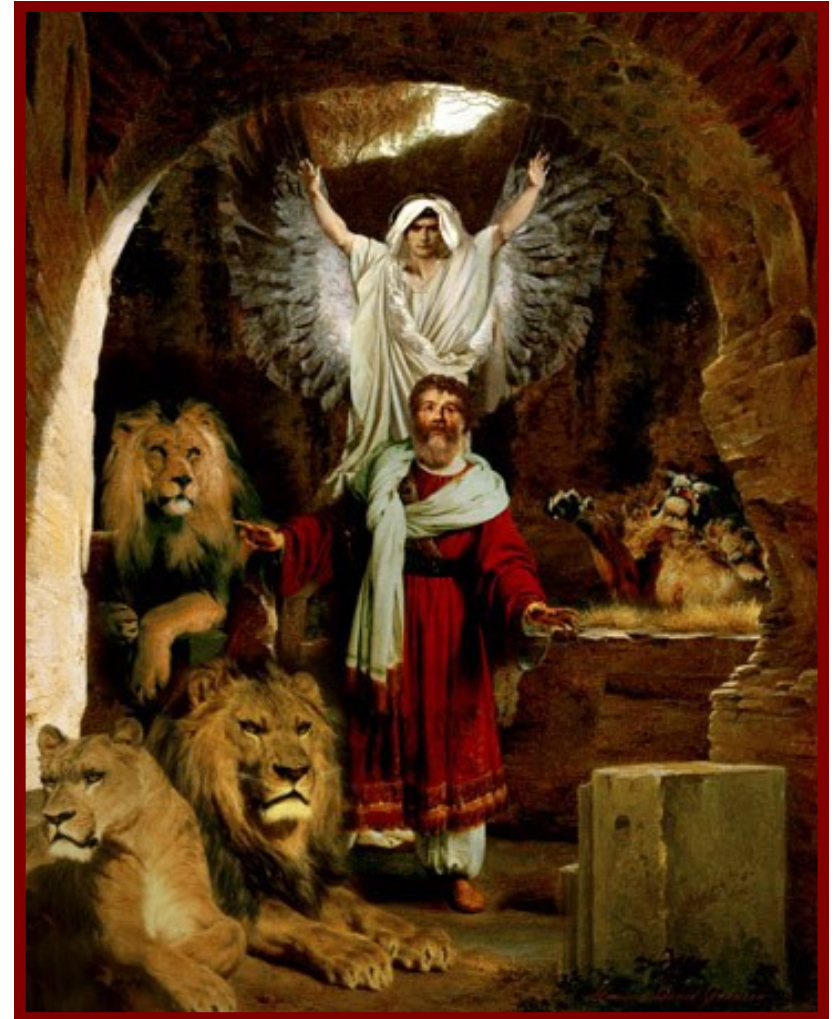


The Book of Daniel

Chapter 5



The Book of Daniel, as it now stands in the ordinary Hebrew Bibles, is generally divided into two main parts. The first includes a series of narratives which are told in the third person and the second, a series of visions which are described in the first person. From its content it readily appears that the Book of Daniel does not have as its objective a summary historical account of the period of the Babylonian Exile, or of the life of Daniel himself. The contents of the Prophecy of Daniel are of a peculiar kind which has no exact parallel in the Bible, except in the Apocalypse of St. John.

Commentary of the Book of Daniel is by Saint Jerome. St. Jerome, who was born Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, and is the most learned of the Fathers of the Western Church. The Church regards him as the greatest of all the doctors in clarifying the Divine Word. While at Rome he made a revision of the current Latin New Testament, and of the Psalms. Then he undertook to translate most of the books of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew. The only parts of the Latin Bible, now known as the Vulgate, which were not either translated or worked over by him are the Books of Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and the two Books of the Maccabees. In the sixteenth century the great Council of Trent pronounced Jerome's Vulgate the authentic and authoritative Latin text of the Catholic Church, without, however, thereby implying a preference for it above the original text or above versions in other languages. In 1907 Pope Pius X entrusted to the Benedictine Order the office of restoring as far as possible the correct text of St. Jerome's Vulgate, which during fifteen centuries of use had naturally become altered in many places. The Bible now ordinarily used by English-speaking Catholics is a translation of the Vulgate, made at Rheims and Douay towards the end of the sixteenth century, and revised by Bishop Challoner in the eighteenth century. The Confraternity Edition of the New Testament appearing in 1950 represents a complete revision.

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Verse 1. "*Belshazzar the king made a great feast for his one thousand nobles; and each one drank in the order of his age.*" It should be known that this man was not the son of Nebuchadnezzar, as readers commonly imagine; but according to Berosus, who wrote the history of the Chaldeans, and also Josephus, who follows Berosus, after Nebuchadnezzar's reign of forty-three years, a son named Evilmerodach succeeded to his throne. It was concerning this king that Jeremiah wrote that in the first year of his reign he raised the head of Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and took him out of his prison (Jer. 52). Josephus likewise reports that after the death of Evilmerodach, his son [actually his brother-in-law] Neriglissar succeeded to his father's throne; after whom in turn came his son Labosordach, [the cuneiform spelling is *Labashi-Marduk*]. Upon the latter's death, his son, Belshazzar [note that Jerome is not aware of Belshazzar's father, Nabonidus], obtained the kingdom, and it is of him that the Scripture now makes mention. After he had been killed by Darius, King of the Medes, who was the maternal uncle of Cyrus, King of the Persians, the empire of the Chaldeans was destroyed by Cyrus the Persian. It was these two

successor in the royal power, and all the more honorable because of his notability. Nor was it strange that Belshazzar should have paid the promised reward upon hearing sad tidings. For either he supposed that his predictions would take place in the distant future, or else he hoped he would obtain mercy by honoring the prophet of God. And if he did not obtain this boon, it was because his sacrilege toward God outweighed the honor he accorded to man.

Verses 30, 31. "*On that same night Belshazzar, King of the Chaldeans, was slain, and Darius the Mede succeeded to his kingdom at the age of sixty-two.*" Josephus writes in his tenth book of the *Jewish Antiquities* that when Babylon had been laid under siege by the Medes and Persians, that is, by Darius and Cyrus, Belshazzar, King of Babylon, fell into such forgetfulness of his own situation as to put on his celebrated banquet and drink from the vessels of the Temple, and even while he was besieged he found leisure for banqueting. From this circumstance the historical account could arise, that he was captured and slaughtered on the same night, while everyone was either terrified by fear of the vision and its interpretation, or else taken up with festivity and drunken banqueting. As for the fact that while Cyrus, King of the Persians, was the victor, and Darius was only King of the Medes, it was Darius who was recorded to have succeeded to the throne of Babylon, this was an arrangement occasioned by factors of age, family relationship, and the territory ruled over. By this I mean that Darius was sixty-two years old, and that, according to what we read, the kingdom of the Medes was more sizable than that of the Persians, and being Cyrus's uncle, he naturally had a prior claim, and ought to have been accounted as successor to the rule of Babylon. Therefore also in a vision of Isaiah which was recited against Babylon, after many other matters too lengthy to mention, an account is given of these things which are to take place: "Behold I Myself will rouse up against them the Medes, a people who do not seek after silver nor desire gold, but who slay the very children with their arrows and have no compassion upon women who suckle their young" (Isa. 13:7). And Jeremiah says: "Sanctify nations against her, even the kings of Media, and the governors thereof and all the magistrates thereof and all the land under the power thereof" (Jer. 51:28). Then follow the words: "The daughter of Babylon is like a threshing-floor during the time of its treading; yet a little while, and the time of its harvesting will come" (Jer. 51:33). And in testimony of the fact that Babylon was captured during a banquet, Isaiah clearly exhorts her to battle when he writes: "Babylon, my beloved, has become a strange spectacle unto me [this rendering differs from the Hebrew original and the Septuagint, and seems altogether unjustified]: set thou the table and behold in the mirrors [the Hebrew says: "set the watch"] those who eat and drink; rise up, ye princes, and snatch up your shields!" (Isa. 21:4, 5).

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will [reading *voluntate* for the erroneous *voluntas* of the text] of the men themselves who do the slaying and promoting to honor, and all the rest. If this be the case, the question arises as to how we are to understand the Scripture: "The heart of a king reposes in the hand of God; He will incline it in whatever direction He wishes" (Prov. 21:1). Perhaps we might say that every saint is a king, for sin does not reign in his mortal body, and his heart therefore is kept safe, for he is in God's hand (Rom. 6). And whatever has once come into the hand of God the Father, according to the Gospel, no man is able to take it away. And whoever is taken away, it is understood that he never was in God's hand at all.

Verses 22, 23. "*Thou too, his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, even though thou knewest all these things, but hast lifted thyself up against the ruler of heaven....*" Because thy great-grandfather, she says, lifted up his heart and hardened his spirit in pride, he therefore was put down from his royal throne and his glory was taken away, and so on (Jer. 4). Therefore in thy case also, because thou knewest these things about thy relative and didst understand that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, thou shouldst not have lifted up thy heart against the ruler of heaven and scoffed at His majesty and perpetrated the deeds which thou hast. Some authorities apply this passage to Antichrist, on the ground that he has imitated the pride of his father, the Devil, and has raised himself up against God. But they must deal with the question of whom Daniel represents, and who is to be understood as interpreting the inscription of God, and who these Medes and Persians are who put Antichrist to death and succeed to his royal power. For there is no doubt but what it is the saints who are to rule after the Antichrist.

Verses 25-28. "*This is the inscription which has been set up: MANE, THECEL, PHARES. And this is the interpretation of the sentence: 'MANE' means that God has numbered thy kingdom and brought it to an end. 'THECEL' means it has been weighed in the scales and has been found deficient (Vulg.: thou hast been weighed and hast been found. . .). 'PHARES' means that thy kingdom has been removed and given to the Medes and Persians.*" The inscription of these three words on the wall simply meant: "Mane, Thecel, Phares"; the first of which sounds forth the idea of "number," and the second "a weighing out," and the third "removal." And so there was a need not only for reading the inscription but also for interpreting what had been read, in order that it might be understood what these words were announcing. That is to say, that God had numbered his kingdom and brought it to an end, and that He had seized hold upon him to weigh him in His judgment-scales, and the sword would slay him before he should meet a natural death; and that his empire would be divided among the Medes and Persians. For Cyrus, the king of the Persians, as we have already mentioned, overthrew the Chaldean Empire in alliance with Darius, his maternal uncle.

Verse 29. (p. 522) "*Then at the kings order Daniel was clothed with purple and a golden chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed to have authority as third ruler in the kingdom.*" Or else, it might be construed as having authority over a third part of the kingdom. At any rate he received the royal insignia of necklace and purple, with the result that he appeared more notable to Darius, who was to be the

kingdoms [the Median and the Persian] which Isaiah in chap. 21 addresses as a charioteer of a vehicle drawn by a camel and an ass. Indeed Xenophon also writes the same thing in connection with the childhood of Cyrus the Great; likewise Pompeius Trogus and many others who have written up the history of the barbarians. Some authorities think that this Darius was the Astyages mentioned in the Greek writings, while others think it was Astyages' son, and that he was called by the other name among the barbarians. "*And each one of the princes who had been invited drank in the order of his own age.*" Or else, as other translators have rendered it: "The king himself was drinking in the presence of all the princes whom he had invited." [The latter rendering seems to be the only one justified by the Aramaic original.]

Verse 2. "*Being now drunken, he therefore gave order that the golden and silver vessels be brought in which his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken away from the temple which was in Jerusalem, in order that the king might drink from them. ...*" The Hebrews hand down some such story as this: that up until the seventieth year, on which Jeremiah had said that the captivity of the Jewish people would be released (a matter of which Zechariah also speaks in the first part of his book), Belshazzar had esteemed God's promise to be of no effect; therefore he turned the failure of the promise into an occasion of joy and arranged a great banquet, scoffing somewhat at the expectation of the Jews and at the vessels of the Temple of God. Punishment, however, immediately ensued. And as to the fact that the author calls Nebuchadnezzar the father of Belshazzar, he does not make any mistake in the eyes of those who are acquainted with the Holy Scripture's manner of speaking, for in the Scripture all progenitors and ancestors are called fathers. This factor also should be borne in mind, that he was not sober when he did these things, but rather when he was intoxicated and forgetful of the punishment which had come upon his progenitor, Nebuchadnezzar.

Verse 4. "*They were drinking wine and praising their gods of gold, of silver, of bronze, of iron, of wood, and of stone.*" How great was their folly! As they drank from golden vessels, they were praising gods of wood and of stone. As long as the vessels had been in the idol-temple of Babylon, God was not moved to wrath, for they had evidently consecrated the property of God to divine worship, even though they did so in accordance with their own depraved views of religion. But after they defiled holy things for the use of men, their punishment followed upon the heels of their sacrilege. Moreover they were praising their own gods and scoffing at the God of the Jews, on the ground that they were drinking from His vessels because of the victory their own gods had bestowed upon them. Applying this figuratively, we should have to say that it applies to all the heretics or to any doctrine which is contrary to truth but which appropriates the words of the Biblical prophets and misuses the testimony of Scripture to suit its own inclination. It furnishes liquor to those whom it deceives and with whom it

has committed fornication. It carries off the vessels of God's Temple and waxes drunken by quaffing them; and it does not give the praise to the God whose vessels they are, but to gods of gold and silver, of bronze, of iron, of wood, and of stone. I think that the golden ones are those which consist of earthly reason. The silver gods are those which possess the charm of eloquence and are fashioned by rhetoric. But those which bring in the fables of the poets and employ ancient traditions containing marked divergences from one another in respect to good taste or folly, such are described as bronze and iron. And those who set forth sheer absurdities are called wooden or stone. The Book of Deuteronomy divides these all into two classes, saying: "Cursed is the man who fashions a graven image and a molten image, the work of the hands of an artificer, and sets it up in a secret place" (Deut. 32:15). For all heretics operate secretly and disguise their fallacious teachings, in order that they may from concealment shoot their arrows against those who are upright in heart.

Verse 5. "*At that same hour some fingers appeared as if they were of a human hand, writing something over against the lampstand upon the surface of the wall of the king's palace. And the king watched the joints of the hand as it wrote.*" He puts it nicely when he says, "At that same hour," just as we earlier read concerning Nebuchadnezzar, "While the saying was yet in the king's mouth." This was in order that the offender might recognize that his punishment was not inflicted upon him for any other reason but his blasphemy.

But as for the circumstance that the fingers seemed to be writing on the wall over against the lampstand, this was to avoid having the hand and the written matter appear at too great a distance from the light (to be clearly visible). And the fingers wrote upon the wall of the royal palace in order that the king might understand that the inscription concerned himself.

Verse 6. "*Then the king's expression was altered. ...*" Here too it is to be observed concerning those Psalms entitled: "For those who will suffer alterations (or vicissitudes)," that the alteration of fortune is not only the lot of the saint but also of the sinner. ["For those who will suffer alteration" is a remarkable interpretation of the Hebrew (*al-shoshannim*)----"according to lilies" (RSV)----rendered in the Authorized Version as "upon Shoshannim." The Vulgate rendering, following that of the Septuagint, is based upon a very implausible vowel pointing: '*al-sheshonim*.'] For we read in this connection: "King Belshazzar was considerably disturbed and his countenance was altered."

Verse 7. *The king therefore cried out vehemently that the magicians should be brought in, and the Chaldeans and the soothsayers....*" Forgetting about the experiences of Nebuchadnezzar, he was following after the ancient and ingrained error of his family, so that instead of summoning a prophet of God he summons the magicians and Chaldeans and soothsayers.

"...*he shall be clothed in purple and he shall have a golden necklace about his neck.*" It is, of course, ridiculous of me to argue about matters of gender in a commentary on the prophets; but inasmuch as an ignorant but ostentatious critic has

rebuked me for changing "necklace" (*torquis*) from feminine to masculine, I will make the brief observation that while Cicero and Vergil use "necklace" in the feminine, Livy uses it in the masculine.

"...*and he shall be the third man in my kingdom. ...*" That means either that he is to be third in rank after the king, or else one of the three princes of the realm----for we elsewhere read of the *tristatai*. [A *tristates* is one who stands next in rank to the king and queen, i.e., a vizier.]

Verse 10. "*Now the queen, by reason of what had happened to the king and his nobles, entered into the banquet-hall. ...*" Josephus says she was Belshazzar's grandmother, whereas Origen says she was his mother. She therefore knew about previous events of which the king was ignorant. So much for Porphyry's far-fetched objection [lit.: "Therefore let Porphyry stay awake nights"----*evigilet*], who fancies that she was the king's wife, and makes fun of the fact that she knows more than her husband does.

Verse 10 (=11). "*There is a man in thy kingdom who possesses within him the spirit of the holy gods.*" All the authorities except Symmachus, who adheres to the Chaldee original, render: "the spirit of God."

"... *and in the days of thy father, wisdom, and knowledge were found in him. . . .*" She calls Nebuchadnezzar his father, according to the custom of the Scriptures, even though, as we remarked before, he was actually his great-grandfather. But Daniel's godly manner of life even amongst the barbarians is worthy of our imitation, for the very grandmother or mother of the king extolled him with such words of praise because of the greatness of his virtues.

Verse 11 (sic!) (=17). "*To this Daniel made answer before the king, saying: 'Thy gifts be unto thyself, and bestow the presents of thy house upon someone else. . . .*" We should follow the example of a man like Daniel, who despised the honor and gifts of a king, and who without any reward even in that early day followed the Gospel injunction: "Freely have ye received, freely give." And besides, when one is announcing sad tidings, it is unbecoming for him willingly to accept gifts.

Verse 19. "*He slew whomever he would and smote to death whomever he wished to; those whom he wished he set on high, and brought low whomever he would.*" Thus he sets forth the example of the king's great-grandfather, in order to teach him the justice of God and make it clear that his great-grandson too was to suffer similar treatment because of his pride. Now if Nebuchadnezzar slew whomever he would and smote to death whomever he wished to; if he set on high those whom he would and brought low whomever he wished to, there is certainly no Divine providence or Scriptural injunction behind these honors and slayings, these acts of promotion and humiliation. But rather, such things ensue from the