**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**DANIEL-004. MENE, TEKEL, PERES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"17. Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another: yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation. 18. O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour: 19. And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down. 20. But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: 21. And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will. 22. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this: 23. But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of Heaven: and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified: 24. Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. 25. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. 26. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. 27. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. 28. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians. 29. Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel with scarlet, and put a chain of gold about his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. 30. In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. 31. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old."*

*Daniel 5:17-31*

Belshazzar is now conceded to have been a historical personage, the son of the last monarch of Babylon, and the other name in the narrative which has been treated as erroneous--namely, Darius--has not been found to be mentioned elsewhere, but is not thereby proved to be a blunder. For why should it not be possible for Scripture to preserve a name that secular history has not yet been ascertained to record, and why must it always be assumed that, if Scripture and cuneiform or other documents differ, it is Scripture that must go to the wall?

We do not deal with the grim picture of the drunken orgy, turned into abject terror as the fingers of a man's hand came forth out of empty air, and in the full blaze of the candlestick wrote the illegible signs. There is something blood-curdling in the visibility of but a part of the hand and its busy writing. Whose was the body, and where was it? No wonder if the riotous mirth was frozen into awe, and the wine lost flavour. Nor need we do more than note the craven-hearted flattery addressed to Daniel by the king, who apparently had never heard of him till the queen spoke of him just before. We have to deal with the indictment, the sentence, and the execution.

**I. The indictment.**

Daniel's tone is noticeably stern. He has no reverential preface, no softening of his message. His words are as if cut with steel on the rock. He brushes aside the promises of vulgar decorations and honours with undisguised contempt, and goes straight to his work of rousing a torpid conscience.

Babylon was the embodiment and type of the godless world-power, and Belshazzar was the incarnation of the spirit which made Babylon. So Daniel's indictment gathers together the main forms of sin, which cleave to every godless national or individual life. And he begins with that feather-brained frivolity which will learn nothing by example. Nebuchadnezzar's fate might have taught his successors what came of God-forgetting arrogance, and attributing success to oneself; and his restoration might have been an object-lesson to teach that devout recognition of the Most High as sovereign was the beginning of a king's prosperity and sanity. But Belshazzar knew all this, and ignored it all. Was he singular in that? Is not the world full of instances of the ruin that attends godlessness, which yet do not check one godless man in his career? The wrecks lie thick on the shore, but their broken sides and gaunt skeletons are not warnings sufficient to keep a thousand other ships from steering right on to the shoals. Of these godless lives it is true, This their way is their folly; yet their posterity approve their sayings, and their doings, and say and do them over again. Incapacity to learn by example is a mark of godless lives.

Further, Belshazzar lifted up himself against the Lord of heaven, and glorified not Him in whose hand was his breath and whose were all his ways. The very essence of all sin is that assertion of self as Lord, as sufficient, as the director of one's path. To make myself my centre, to depend on myself, to enthrone my own will as sovereign, is to fly in the face of nature and fact, and is the mother of all sin. To live to self is to die while we live; to live to God is to live even while we die. Nations and individuals are ever tempted thus to ignore God, and rebelliously to say, Who is Lord over us? or presumptuously to think themselves architects of their own fortunes, and sufficient for their own defence. Whoever yields to that temptation has let the prince of the devils in, and the inferior evil spirits will follow. Positive acts are not needed; the negative omission to glorify the God of our life binds sin on us.

Further, Belshazzar, the type of godlessness, had desecrated the sacrificial vessels by using them for his drunken carouse, and therein had done just what we do when we take the powers of heart and mind and will, which are meant to be filled with affections, thoughts, and purposes, that are an odour of a sweet smell, well-pleasing to God, and desecrate them by pouring from them libations before creatures. Is not love profaned when it is lavished on men or women without one reference to God? Is not the intellect desecrated when its force is spent on finite objects of thought, and never a glance towards God? Is not the will prostituted from its high vocation when it is used to drive the wheels of a God-ignoring life?

The coin bears the image and superscription of the true king. It is treason to God to render it to any paltry god of our own coronation. Belshazzar was an avowed idolater, but many of us are worshipping gods which see not, nor hear, nor know as really as he did. We cannot but do so, if we are not worshipping God; for men must have some person or thing which they regard as their supreme good, to which the current of their being sets, which, possessed, makes them blessed; and that is our god, whether we call it so or not.

Further, Belshazzar was carousing while the Medes and Persians were ringing Babylon round, and his hand should have been grasping a sword, not a wine-cup. Drunkenness and lust, which sap manhood, are notoriously stimulated by peril, as many a shipwreck tells when desperate men break open the spirit casks, and go down to their death intoxicated, and as many an epidemic shows when morality is flung aside, and mad vice rules and reels in the streets before it sinks down to die. A nation or a man that has shaken off God will not long keep sobriety or purity.

**II. After the stern catalogue of sins comes the tremendous sentence.**

Daniel speaks like an embodied conscience, or like an avenging angel, with no word of pity, and no effort to soften or dilute the awful truth. The day for wrapping up grim facts in muffled words was past. Now the only thing to be done was to bare the sword, and let its sharp edge cut. The inscription, as given in verse 25, is simply Numbered, numbered, weighed and breakings. The variation in verse 28 (Peres) is the singular of the noun used in the plural in verse 25, with the omission of U, which is merely the copulative and. The disjointed brevity adds to the force of the words. Apparently, they were not written in a character which the king's wise men could read, and probably were in Aramaic letters as well as language, which would be familiar to Daniel. Of course, a play on the word Peres suggests the Persian as the agent of the breaking. Daniel simply supplied the personal application of the oracular writing. He fits the cap on the king's head. God hath numbered thy kingdom ... thou art weighed ... thy kingdom is divided (broken).

These three fatal words carry in them the summing up of all divine judgment, and will be rung in the ears of all who bring it on themselves. Belshazzar is a type of the end of every godless world-power and of every such individual life. Numbered--for God allows to each his definite time, and when its sum is complete, down falls the knife that cuts the threads. Weighed--for after death the judgment, and a godless life, when laid in the balance which His hand holds, is altogether lighter than vanity. Breakings--for not only will the godless life be torn away from its possessions with much laceration of heart and spirit, but the man himself will be broken like some earthen vessel coming into sharp collision with an express engine. Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the same night in which it was carried out in act; we see it long before, and we can read it. But some of us are mad enough to sit unconcerned at the table, and go on with the orgy, though the legible letters are gleaming plain on the wall.

**III. The execution of the sentence need not occupy us long.**

Belshazzar so little realised the facts, that he issued his order to deck out Daniel in the tawdry pomp he had promised him, as if a man with such a message would be delighted with purple robes and gold chains, and made him third ruler of the kingdom which he had just declared was numbered and ended by God. The force of folly could no further go. No wonder that the hardy invaders swept such an Imbecile from his throne without a struggle! His blood was red among the lees of the wine-cups, and the ominous writing could scarcely have faded from the wall when the shouts of the assailants were heard, the palace gates forced, and the half-drunken king, alarmed too late, put to the sword. He that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.