

Daniel 5:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then came in all the king's wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.

Analysis

Despite their expertise and promised rewards, all the king's wise men 'could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof.' This failure is comprehensive: they couldn't even read the writing, much less interpret its meaning. Some scholars suggest the writing used an unknown script, archaic language, or was written in a way that made reading difficult. Others propose God sovereignly prevented their understanding. Either way, the point is clear: human wisdom fails before divine revelation. This repeated failure (chapters 2, 4, 5) establishes pattern: Babylon's vaunted intellectual tradition—astronomy, mathematics, literature—proves useless for understanding God's truth. Only those enlightened by God's Spirit (Daniel) can interpret. This vindicates biblical epistemology: natural man cannot receive spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14); revelation requires illumination.

Historical Context

The wise men's failure may relate to the writing's nature. The text was likely Aramaic (Daniel's language) but perhaps written in unusual format: vertically, without vowels, abbreviated, or using archaic script. Ancient Semitic languages used consonants without vowels, allowing multiple readings depending on vowel points. The wise men may have seen the characters but couldn't determine the correct reading or meaning. This technical difficulty became divine instrument: God ensured that only His chosen interpreter (Daniel) could decode the message.

The historical pattern shows how God repeatedly uses foolish things to confound the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27), demonstrating salvation and revelation come through grace, not merit.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. What does the wise men's inability to even read the writing teach about human wisdom's limitations?
2. How does God use human inadequacy to highlight His grace in granting understanding to chosen servants?
3. Why does Scripture repeatedly show expert failure before divine revelation?

Interlinear Text

וְ	לֹא	לְמַלְכָּא:	מִכְמִין	כִּלְעָל	לִין	אֲזִיל	כָּל	יְ
Then	came	in all	wise	the king's	not	men but they could		
H116	H5954	H3606	H2445	H4430	H3809	H3546		
לְהַזְעַע	הַ	לְמַלְכָּא:	וּפְשַׁר	אָ	כְּתָבָא			
the writing	read	the interpretation	nor make known	the king's				
H3792	H7123	H6591	H3046	H4430				

Additional Cross-References

Daniel 2:27 (Kingdom): Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, The secret which the king hath demanded cannot the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, the soothsayers, shew unto the king;

Genesis 41:8 (Parallel theme): And it came to pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled; and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all the wise men thereof: and Pharaoh told them his dream; but there was none that could interpret them unto Pharaoh.

Daniel 4:7 (Parallel theme): Then came in the magicians, the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers: and I told the dream before them; but they did not make known unto me the interpretation thereof.

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