

The Writing on the Wall

How Can One Understand the Words Written on the Wall During Belshazzar's Feast?

The text was written "by fingers like those of a human hand," and Babylon's king Belshazzar saw the hand writing the words. But he did not understand what was written or what the text meant, so he summoned his wise men. Neither could they interpret the writing. The king's mother then called for Daniel, who was able both to read and interpret it.

The text does not explain why they could not interpret the writing. But Daniel is able to read it, and it says: *Mene, mene, tekel ufarsin*.

Daniel's interpretation is: God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting, and your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.

This is not a translation of the words written, but an interpretation based on them. But what exactly are the words and their meaning?

The text in this part of Daniel is written in Aramaic, and if one seeks the interpretation solely from the Aramaic, the words most naturally refer to units of currency: a mina, a shekel, and part of a mina, a half-mina. But *teqel* also means "to weigh" in Aramaic. Coins were, after all, always connected with weight.

However, if one turns to Hebrew, much of interest emerges.

The Hebrew verb *manah* means "to count" or "to determine the number of." In Hebrew there is also a grammatical construction called the infinitive absolute. It is used to give emphasis to something, and in consonantal writing the verbs would appear identical; only the vocalization would differ.

With this interpretation, the repetition of *mene* would give emphasis: "you are surely numbered." This provides a solid basis for Daniel's interpretation. Even if it is not an explicit infinitive absolute, the repetition *mene mene* already gives emphasis.

The second word is *teqel*. If one leaves Aramaic and turns to Hebrew, there is an interesting verb that would fit: *qalal*. If the verb is put into the yiqtol form in the second person singular ("you"), it becomes *tiqal*. It carries the meaning "you become light" or "you are light." It is possible that this is the interpretation Daniel makes. The word for "scales" does not appear in the writing on the wall; it is found only in Daniel's interpretation.

But the implications do not end there if the Hebrew word *qalal* underlies the interpretation. The word *qalal* also has another meaning that fits very well here: "to despise" or "to treat with contempt." The verb is used in Genesis 12:3, which the NIV translates: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." The first word translated "curse" is *qalal*. It is not the usual word for "curse"; rather, it carries the sense of reviling or treating

someone contemptuously. One may understand it as “taking someone lightly,” not considering the other person to have weight or significance.

What had Belshazzar just done? He had brought in the temple vessels from Jerusalem and drunk from them while praising his own gods. He had indeed taken the God of Israel lightly, and now judgement would follow.

The final word is *ufarsin*. Here there is a Hebrew verb, *paras*, meaning “to divide.” At the same time, *paras* is the Hebrew name for Persia. One may therefore understand *ufarsin* as “and divisions.” Daniel’s interpretation is that the kingdom will be given to the Medes and Persians.

If one connects *qalal*, “to take lightly,” with the way it is used in Genesis 12:3, one may also make a further association. The one who “takes lightly” something is struck by a curse. The word used for curse in Genesis 12:3 is *arar*. It is a very strong word that can imply destruction or annihilation. Belshazzar had now been weighed and found light; he had taken lightly the fact that he mocked the God of heaven. Now a curse would strike, which in this case meant that Babylon would fall, never again to rise as a united kingdom.

Could the text perhaps have been written in Paleo-Hebrew script? Was that the reason why Babylon’s wise men could not read it? It is impossible to say.

But if one considers the Hebrew wordplays and associations described above, there is a strong harmony between what was written on the wall and Daniel’s interpretation of the text:

Mene mene teqel ufarsin

*You are surely numbered, you are found wanting,
and the consequence is division by the Persians*

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