


Reading Acts


Some Thoughts on the Book of Acts and Pauline Theology


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 February 1, 2020 (<https://readingacts.com/2020/02/01/daniel-55-12-what-was-the-meaning-of-the-handwriting-on-the-wall/>)

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Daniel 5:5-12 – What was the Meaning of the Handwriting on the Wall? (<https://readingacts.com/2020/02/01/daniel-55-12-what-was-the-meaning-of-the-handwriting-on-the-wall/>)

The fingers of a “man’s hand” appear and write on the wall while [the feast of Belshazzar](https://readingacts.com/2020/01/31/daniel-5-the-feast-of-belshazzar/) (<https://readingacts.com/2020/01/31/daniel-5-the-feast-of-belshazzar/>) continued. This writing appears on A wall “near the lampstands” so the king can clearly see the hand writing the words. This writing is an inscription and is a parody of Assyrian or Babylonian official writing. Just as the King of Babylon inscribes words on statues or walls, so too the Lord is inscribing his own imperial edict for the king to read. What was the Meaning of the Handwriting on the Wall?



([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belshazzar%27s_Feast_\(Rembrandt\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belshazzar%27s_Feast_(Rembrandt))) Belshazzar's reaction is absolute fear, he turns pale, and his legs give way. Literally this is the "bands / knots of his legs were loosed", he comes very near to fainting. This idiom can be translated a number of different ways, the NRSV, for example, has "his knees knocked together." Seow suggests that the idiom could be translated "his bowels were loosed" (*Daniel*, 79).

Belshazzar "calls out" for his advisors. The verb here is a participle, used with a to-be verb to imply a continuous action: he "was screaming" for his advisors. Once again in the book the wise men are consulted but they cannot make anything of the writing. Even though they are educated men, these are scribes and scholars cannot read (or understand) the message.

Was the message intended to be understood? Polaski notes several examples of inscriptions that were meant to be seen but not necessarily read. Inscriptions were power-plays and intended to send a message, even to people that could not read the message (657). Often inscriptions were about more than recording an event. They were a guarantee the event happened or would happen. Thus the judgement on Babylon certain is "written in stone" quite literally.

The Queen (possible Belshazzar's mother) tells him "Don't look so pale," basically "show some backbone!" Belshazzar can look no worse, his mother publicly rebuking his cowardice! (Did she stop to comb his hair and tell him to tuck his shirt in as well?) She recalls what Daniel had done and recommends that he be called in to interpret this writing. She

understands that Nebuchadnezzar believed him to be very powerful, and he is summoned. There is a subtle word-play in the queen-mother's speech. Daniel, she recalls, was able to "loosen knots" (verse 12, "solve problems"), which is ironic since the king had his "knots loosened" (verse 6, perhaps that he has soiled himself!)

Daniel is summoned and questioned by the King. The king asks him if he is Daniel, indicating his ignorance of the man. Belshazzar also promises him the same reward as offered to the wise-men, a promotion to the third highest in the kingdom, essentially riches and power. Daniel is less respectful with Belshazzar than he had been with Nebuchadnezzar. He tells Belshazzar to keep his gifts and then describes Nebuchadnezzar's glory, implying Belshazzar nothing lie Nebuchadnezzar

The Handwriting on the Wall consisted of four words, all monetary weights: A minah, a tekell (a shekel, 1/60 of a mina), and a parsin (a half, probably of a mina) are common coins. This is an odd message to have caused such a commotion during the wild party of Belshazzar! This interpretation was first suggested in 1886 by Clermont-Ganneau (cited by Driver, *Daniel*, 69) and is accepted by many scholars.

Daniel tells Belshazzar that the hand was "sent out" by God (it was not God's hand). The sending of the hand is another element of the imperial rule of God theme in this chapter. A king would not go himself and inscribe a message on a wall, he would send someone to do it for him. So to the sovereign Lord has sent an ambassador to place an inscription on the wall of Belshazzar's palace. Daniel does not call upon God to help him read the inscription because it is not a mystery – Daniel is simply doing his job as a royal scribe reading the inscription for the king (Polaski, 659).

Rather than nouns, Daniel takes the words as passive participles and build the meaning from a verbal form. Like Hebrew, Aramaic can be written without vowels. When the vowels are supplied, the word may be a noun or a verb (or another word altogether!) The reading of the words may have been complicated by not knowing how they were pronounced.

Daniel interpreted the handwriting on the wall:

- *Mene, mene*, meaning that God has numbered Belshazzar's days, the noun *mene* is taken as a verb, "to count, number."
- *Tekel*, God has weighed Belshazzar in the balance and found him wanting, he does not measure up to God's standard. The root of the word *shekel* means "to weigh."
- *(U)Parsin*, literally split up or divided, meaning that the kingdom will be split between the Medes and the Persians. There is a double meaning here, the Aramaic root *prs* means to divide, and sounds like the name of the Persian Empire.

Belshazzar does not live out the night. The Persians capture the city that night and Belshazzar is killed. In Daniel 5:30 we there are no details, simply the statement the king was dead and Persia was in control. According to Xenophon the city of Babylon was captured without much resistance while the inhabitants were celebrating a festival (Herodotus 1.191 and Xenophon (*Cyropedia* VII v. 15-31).

As early as Isaiah 21:9 the prophets announced with joy "Babylon is Fallen" and the vision in Daniel 2 made declared the empire would not last long after the death of the "head of gold" Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel 5 declares those prophecies are fulfilled in a spectacular manner. On a theological level, the book of Daniel is clear God established Babylon as an empire and has replaced Babylon with Persia.