Short Note

On an Assyriological Interpretation of the Book of Daniel 5:1–28

By Immanuel Freedman

The Book of Daniel, chapter 5, records an incident during a feast at Belshazzar’s palace on the night that Babylon fell to Cyrus in 539BCE. According to Herodotus,1 knowing that Babylon was primarily protected by the Euphrates River that ran under its walls, Cyrus ordered the river diverted upstream and his troops waded in the now thigh-high water to take the city by surprise. After conquest, Daniel became one of three commissioners over 120 regional kings or satraps (Daniel 6:1–2) and Cyrus permitted captive peoples including the Jewish people to practice their religion and return to their native countries.

At the feast, Daniel interpreted a phrase stated to be מנה מנה תכלי מנא מנא.2 According to the Jewish Encyclopedia entry “MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN”3 Talmudists believed the text to be Hebrew or Aramaic, either an archaic script or a crypticographic cipher that only Daniel could read. However, Daniel’s explanation has only three words rather than four, the repetition of MENE is not explained, and instead of plural PHARSIN, singular PERĒS is translated (Daniel 5:26–28).

To resolve these long-standing questions, let us note that in the words of the New American Standard Bible, Daniel 1:3–4 states that “the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials [or eunuchs], to bring in some of the sons of Israel…and he ordered him to teach them the literature [or writing] and language of the Chaldeans” whose languages historically included Akkadian.

Bearing in mind the sound shift /š/ to /t/ from Akkadian to Aramaic,4 the message may have been ma-na ma-na šiqlu(m)5 parrası̇n in normalized form, translated as “[All the] minas [have become] a shekel of two halves.” The Babylonian mina and shekel were units of volume as well as weight and the reduplicated Sumerian signs MA.NA MA.NA signify a totality or entirety of minas.6

The three words that Daniel explained to Belshazzar appear to be the related Akkadian verbal roots mn’ (manûm) ‘to count’, šql (šaqālum) ‘to weigh’, and prs (parāsum) ‘to divide’.

The meaning is now clear. The phrase “All the minas have become a shekel of two halves” signifies that all the minas of water have been reduced to a shekel since the river has been diverted, in accordance with the statements by Herodotus (op. cit.).

Immanuel Freedman, a member of the International Association for Assyriology, is the author of numerous articles including “On horses and bitumen in mmaAPI’N” (NABU, 2014) and “The Marduk Star Nebû” (to be published in the Cuneiform Digital Library Bulletin in 2015). He holds a doctorate in physics from the University of Durham, England, and is a Senior Member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

---

5 The mimation -m was often omitted in the Neo-Babylonian era.