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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 מנא מנא תקל ופדסיו.[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 cryptographic 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] *parrasīn* 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.*).

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[1] Herodotus, *Book 1.191*, retrieved from www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/hh1190.htm on June 28, 2014.
[2] Hebrew Bible, Daniel 5:25, retrieved from www.ccel.org/a/anonymous/hebrewot/Daniel.html on June 28, 2014.
[3] Adler, Cyrus, and Isidore Singer. 1906. *The Jewish encyclopedia: A descriptive record of the history, religion, literature, and customs of the Jewish people from the earliest times to the present day.* New York: Funk & Wagnalls, retrieved from www.jewishencylopedia.com on Feb 3, 2013.
[4] See page 590 of Huehnergard, John. 2011. *A grammar of Akkadian*, third edition. Harvard Semitic Series 45. Winona Lake, Wisconsin: Eisenbrauns.
[5] The mimation *-m* was often omitted in the Neo-Babylonian era.
[6] Hayes, John L. 2000. *A manual of Sumerian grammar and texts*, second revised and expanded edition. Malibu, California: Undena Publications.